

DANCING WITH AN
ENIGMATIC
DUKE

ABIGAIL AGAR

Dancing with an Enigmatic Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

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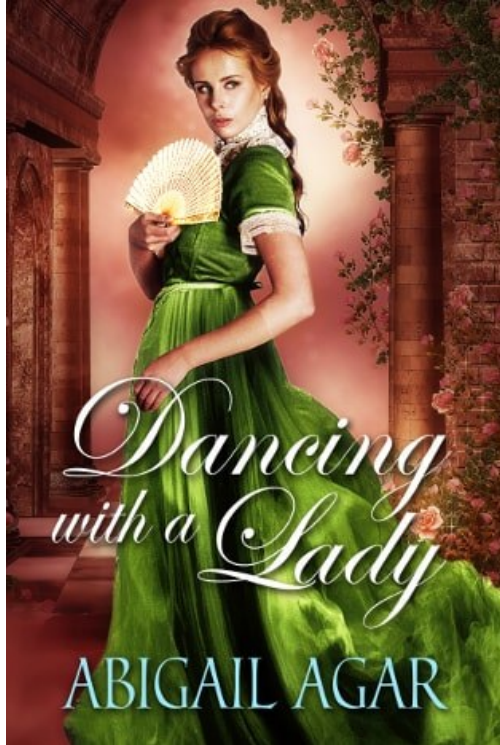
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Dancing with an Enigmatic Duke

Introduction

When Emmeline was summoned to London by her brother, the Earl of Pentworth, she never expected that she would have to fight for her right to choose her own match. She quickly realizes that he is willing to sell her off to the first man who offers. She knows she has to act fast! The answer to her problems comes when she makes an elaborate plan with her brother's closest friend to pretend to be courting. Having the future Duke interested in her will certainly make her more attractive to other potential suitors. What happens though when this unexpected friendship blossoms into something greater, possibly a match made in heaven?

Lord Nash Torrington is beset by matches that his mother insists are splendid, but all he really wants is to focus on his business endeavors. However, it is obvious that his mother will not be satisfied until Nash is properly married off whether he likes it or not. When his best friend's beguiling sister arrives in London, Nash sees a golden opportunity that might just solve both of their problems. Things don't always go according to plan though and he finds himself surprisingly stricken with Emmeline's wit and unique beauty. Will he be courageous enough to declare his true feelings?

Waltzing across ballroom after ballroom together, Emmeline and Nash

will quickly find it hard to believe their courtship is a scheme. Will they be able to make their dreams come true and marry for love?

Chapter 1

England, 1813

The road down which the carriage pulled her to London did not inspire her with great confidence. She had hoped that Harcourt would have seen it fit to come and meet her halfway at least, but Emmeline was left to get herself into the city. The carriage driver her brother Harcourt had arranged would not deign to speak to her as she was an unmarried woman and she wagered the man had a grudge against the fact that she was from Scotland, even if she was as English as anyone else by rights.

Emmeline did have a slight accent, she had inherited her father's noble bearing of height, and could little stand ignorance. She was in no mood to be trifled with and if the driver wanted silence, then he would get it. At least she did not have to listen to any bland rants that the English seemed to engage in, as if it were some sport to tout misery.

She could tell as they neared London. The roads became slightly less tedious and her driver's mood seemed to improve. She heard him pick up a tune that she could scarcely make out the words to, but that sounded rather jaunty. She felt her own spirits lift as she saw the outline of the buildings against the sky.

It had been a long journey and she was tired. She had not seen her brother in many years, and Emmeline pondered what he would be like. She could only imagine an older version of the tiresome boy he had been when he left for boarding school.

The streets of London were a maze of stone and smells. She did not know where to look. It was certainly different to her estate. She longed to see home suddenly with a keenness.

The people who walked alongside the carriages showed no fear of being trampled as they dashed out in front of horses and wagons alike. Yells echoed off the stone walls at the antics of the people on foot, but things moved on anyway. It frayed Emmeline's nerves, but the occupants of the other carriages seemed unmoved.

Emmeline was grateful when her carriage turned off the road and

entered a gated estate. She held onto the handhold and looked out the carriage window with interest. She had not seen the London estate that her brother occupied. She held her estate and he his own. With their parents gone, it was inevitable that her brother would summon her, but Emmeline had been dreading it. Being summoned by her brother could only mean one thing. He was ready to wed her off. Emmeline took a deep breath as the carriage pulled to a halt.

The driver opened the door and helped her down. He looked thoroughly glad to be rid of her. She ignored him, favouring the tall man who had come out the doors to greet her.

“Emmeline, I hardly recognise you!” Harcourt smiled and grasped the hands she held out to him.

She returned his warm smile. “Well, it has been something of a lifetime. How has England treated you, dear brother?”

He released her hands and guided her towards the front doors of the house. A doorman stood holding the door open for them. Emmeline gave him a grateful dip of her head for his service as she passed through the door ahead of her brother.

Once inside, Harcourt said, “I have fared most excellently. My time at school has afforded me a good mind, and I can’t really complain too much. I should have sent for you sooner. I apologise, but I was getting things sorted.”

“Do not fret over it,” Emmeline said with a gentle pat on her brother’s arm. “What would a month or two change in the course of all this?”

Harcourt dipped his head to her. “I see you have grown much in our time apart, and not just in height. You are nearly as tall as me.”

“I had worried that it might dismay you that I have shot up as a tree overnight. Mother always despaired of it, saying it would cost me a husband, surely.” Emmeline folded her hands in front of her. Her hair was pinned up as well as she could manage it on her own and she worried as Harcourt’s eyes went to the door. “My lady servant was ill, and I thought it better that she not have to endure the journey. After all, I knew you would have someone to help me here, and there were very little in the way of introductions between Scotland and my arrival.”

Harcourt's expression took on annoyance. "You should have written to me. I would have sent a servant to meet you, or made alternative arrangements."

"It wasn't necessary. See, I am here now and quite well. My hair might look a little frightful, but I think it is passing." Emmeline straightened her back, bringing all her imposing height to the forefront. "Are we to bicker as children, or may I go and get refreshed? It is late in the day and it has been a long ride."

He frowned. "Hold no ill will against me, Sister. I was thinking of your comfort. I can see that your strong will has remained intact despite the tempering of age."

"I cannot deny that," Emmeline said with a laugh, which she hid behind her hand as her mother had taught her to do. "Now, about that room?"

Harcourt tugged on a bell chord, which brought a female maid and a young manservant to the lobby with haste. The maid gave the manservant a disapproving look as he panted from his run to answer the lord's call. "Yates, will you fetch any bags that Lady Callum may have? Roger should have left them on the steps for you." The young man was off in a flash to go do as he was told. Harcourt rolled his eyes, to Emmeline's amusement. "Jasmine, take Lady Callum up to the pink room. I shall wait here and inform Yates of the correct room to deliver the bags."

The maid curtsied. "Yes, Sir." She turned toward Emmeline with a smile. "Right this way, Miss."

Emmeline did as the maid bid, following her slim form up the stairs. Emmeline admired the French wallpaper and its lovely country scenes. The room she was led to was the second on the right.

Jasmine held the door open for Emmeline to pass through. She stepped inside the room and noticed immediately why her brother had called it the pink room. The wall was painted a soft pink. She had expected more of the elaborate wall coverings, but she rather liked the simplicity of it.

"Do you like it?" Jasmine eyed Emmeline curiously.

She nodded. "It's quite lovely."

“You have a beautiful accent, if you don’t mind me saying, Miss.” Jasmine dipped her head as if she had done something to be ashamed of.

Emmeline went over to the bed and sat down with a sigh of relief. “Thank you, and please do not be so bashful around me. I promise you that I am quite easy to get along with.”

Jasmine did not get a chance to respond, as the next moment Yates came into the room with a travelling bag in each hand. “Pardon me, Miss. But I came up as quickly as I could.”

“Just set them down anywhere,” Emmeline said, with a wave of her hand towards the dressing table. “I’ll go through them once I am rested.”

Yates did as he was told and left with a bob of his head. Once he was gone the maid offered, “I can stay and help you put your things away.”

“No, no.” Emmeline stretched her hands over her head. “I just want a bit of quiet and perhaps some tea, if it wouldn’t hinder the kitchen staff too much.”

Jasmine grinned. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. Cook always has extra biscuits and hot tea on hand. Lord Pentworth tends to miss teatimes when he gets his head buried in business.”

“It seems odd to be around my brother after such an expanse of time apart,” Emmeline admitted in a whisper. “I suppose that is only natural.”

Jasmine approached her. “I suppose it is.” She leaned against the bedpost. “I heard that you were here for the season. That sounds exciting.”

“It is possibly true. My brother has not come out and said as such, but it does seem likely that he has brought me to London to find a match.” Emmeline frowned at the thought. “I do not know how exciting I find the prospect.

Jasmine gasped. “Do you not wish to marry, Miss?”

“It is not that. I just know the way such things work.” She smiled. “Fear not for I am quite resigned to finding a husband. I only hope that I get a chance to make the choice for myself.”

Emmeline had expected her brother to come to find her later in the day, but he seemed to have left her to her own devices. She took advantage of the lull in activity to read. There was a knock at the door. “Enter,” Emmeline called.

Jasmine slipped inside the room with a smile. “Good afternoon, Miss. Did you rest well?”

“Oh, yes.” Emmeline put her book aside on the desk. “I’m glad someone finally came to check in with me. I do not even know what time this household eats the evening meal and I was beginning to fret that I might be forgotten.”

Jasmine clutched her hands together. “Your brother would never stand for that. I actually came to offer my aid in helping you dress, Miss. The evening meal is in a couple of hours. Do you wish me to run you a bath?”

“That would be nice.” Emmeline longed for a warm bath after her long journey. Jasmine smiled and went to get the water ready.

Emmeline looked out of the window and pondered the city of London. Tall buildings broke up the horizon and steam rose up from some of them. Or was it smoke?

“Is this your first time in London, Miss?” Jasmine asked as she came back through the room.

Emmeline nodded. “Does it show that much?”

“Just a touch,” Jasmine whispered. She was a petite and feminine height that Emmeline envied. She wagered that Jasmine never had men look at her in bewilderment, especially the shorter members of the gender.

“Mother insisted that I came to London as an infant, but of course, I do not recall that.”

“I don’t think there’s many that would, Miss,” Jasmine offered with humour as she went back to the bath.

Emmeline decided she liked Jasmine. She seemed friendly and down-to-earth, not at all what she was expecting of a maid in the home of Lord Pentworth. Jasmine popped her head back in and waved for Emmeline to follow her. “Your bath is ready, Miss. Do you require assistance?”

“It was quite the ordeal to get into this dress alone, so assistance would be wonderful.” Emmeline stood up and turned around so that Jasmine could get to the ties.

Jasmine clucked her tongue. “However did you manage to do this by yourself?”

“Well, I got the maid at the inn to help me very quickly.”

Jasmine giggled. “I wager that it is something she doesn’t have to do often.”

“She did look rather surprised by the request, but I had no lady-in-waiting to help.” Emmeline shrugged out of the dress as Jasmine finished loosening the ties. With Jasmine’s help, she quickly disrobed and headed towards the bath, sinking into the warm water and sighing with contentment. “This is worth the trip.”

Jasmine frowned and asked quietly, “Why did you have no ladies with you, if you don’t mind me asking, Miss?”

“Oh, Caeley, my lady’s maid, was ill. I did not want to make her undergo such a journey in her condition. She is looking after the household until I return, along with my housekeeper.” Emmeline took a cloth that Jasmine passed to her and began washing her arms. “You look surprised.”

Jasmine shook her head and then sheepishly said, “I just don’t know many nobles who would put the wellbeing of their staff above their own comforts.”

“I could have taken another maid along, but I am very particular about my company these days.” Emmeline gave Jasmine a smile. “I think I am accustomed to having things my own way.”

The maid dipped her head. "May I have permission to speak openly, Miss?"

"I thought you were doing a well enough job of that," Emmeline teased. "Please do."

Jasmine's cheeks had turned pink from Emmeline's words. "You said you were hoping that you got to pick your husband. Are you of the mind that Lord Pentworth may not allow you to do so? He seems a reasonable enough man as men go."

"You probably know more of him than I do." Emmeline paused her washing and sighed. "I only remember His Lordship from our time as children before he went off to school."

Jasmine stood to the side, not interfering with Emmeline but there if she should need help. "I have only worked in his employ for a short time, Miss."

"Then we are both in the same predicament, I fear." She fell silent as she bathed. Jasmine stood by silently. Emmeline tried not to think about the woman, or her brother and his schemes. Instead, she thought of home. What would Caeley be doing? Finally, when she could tarry no more, she said, "I am ready to get out, Jasmine."

"Yes, Miss."

Emmeline shivered at the rush of cool air as she rose out of the warm water. Jasmine swiftly wrapped a large towel around her. "I'll get your robe while you dry off, Miss." She was swiftly out of the room before Emmeline could say anything.

While the maid was absent, Emmeline dried herself and wrapped the towel around her shoulders. When Jasmine returned, she draped the robe around Emmeline's shoulders and took the damp towel from her.

"Fetch me the pale yellow dress out of my case, will you?" Emmeline requested. The maid had been a fair worker and a sweet soul thus far.

"Of course, Miss." Jasmine led the way into the bedroom with Emmeline right behind her.

Emmeline tugged her robe around her tightly. "There is a terrible draught in here."

“It might be the window.” The maid laid down the dress on the bed and hastened to draw the heavy drapes over the lighter curtains. “Is that better, Miss?”

“Some, yes,” Emmeline said with a shiver as she shed the robe. With Jasmine’s help, she was dressed as swiftly as one could expect with all the layers that a lady must wear. Emmeline felt more herself once she was dressed and seated in front of her dressing table.

Jasmine pinned Emmeline’s hair in place and smiled at her. “You have such lovely honey-coloured hair. Was your mother fair?”

“She was. I inherited her hair and Father’s stature.”

“You are very tall, but it suits you well, Miss.”

“Thank you. But a good deal of the men I have met do not hold that opinion. They want sweet, demure wives who can tilt their heads up sweetly to look at them through their lashes. It’s hard to do that unless I kneel with some of them.” Emmeline looked over at Jasmine as the maid laughed. She tried to stop herself but failed miserably, and eventually Emmeline joined her in the laughter.

Finally, Jasmine professed, “I’m so sorry, Miss. I didn’t mean to laugh so.”

“Nonsense, it was humorous. It felt good to laugh. It has been a spell since I have done that.” Emmeline gave Jasmine a bright smile in the dressing table mirror. “Please do not apologise for it.”

Jasmine smiled back at Emmeline in the mirror. “You are a kind soul, Miss.”

“I do not suppose that will aid me much in the coming season, but perhaps some grand figure of a man will see me for who I truly am.” Emmeline sighed picturing the chances of that happening as very slim. “Here I am going on like a yearling fawning over the new flowers in the field. Mother always said I was quite stubborn. I shall have to set my mind to prove her right.”

Jasmine nodded smartly. “I think you shall do just that. You seem a woman with a good head on her shoulders, Miss. You should be fine.”

She stepped back as Emmeline admired the hairstyle that she had created. “At least I will look wonderful thanks to your administrations. Will you be here through the season?”

“Yes, Miss. I had better help the kitchen staff. We’ve been a bit understaffed as of late.”

Emmeline nodded. “Of course. When will the evening meal be?”

“In about half an hour, Miss. Do you want me to show you where the dining room is? It is on the way to the kitchens, and I would not mind at all.”

Emmeline nodded. “That would be fine. Then I can take a walk around to prepare my body for the meal at hand.”

After Jasmine left her at the dining room, Emmeline wandered the corridors of the manor house. It was of impressive size, even if the ancestral castle in Scotland dwarfed it. Still, it was comfortable. She admired the artwork and passed time peering into rooms to discover their function.

She even met a couple of other staff members who were surprised at her interest in them. Emmeline shook her head as she walked down a particularly lovely hallway adorned with tables topped with planters of a fragrant evergreen plant whose name she did not know. She wondered if her brother was too busy to interact with his staff much or if he merely chose not to.

The Harcourt she had met today was not the young man who had left to go to school. He was not the same boy who had hidden her dolls or chased her around the large tree down by the stream. No, he was a different person altogether, and Emmeline was unsure of how to approach him.

“Ah, there you are, Lady Callum. His Lordship sent me to let you know that dinner would be served soon,” a male voice said behind Emmeline.

She turned to see a man she assumed to be the butler by his dress. His greying hair was trimmed and neatly combed and he held his hands behind his back, his expression thoughtfully awaiting her reply.

Emmeline nodded. "I must have lost track of time. I shall head to the dining room forthwith."

"I can lead you back if you should need, My Lady?" He bowed to her and held his hand out showing her the way.

Emmeline gave him a curtsy and smiled. "Thank you. That would be wise. I would not want to get caught down an errant hallway and keep my brother waiting."

While the man seemed pleasant enough, he did not talk on the way to the dining room, except to direct her on which way to go. Emmeline grew tired of trying to speak with him. He was much too professional to converse with her as his fellows had.

All she managed to get out of the butler was that his name was Gerald. Emmeline resigned herself to looking at the paintings on the wall as they walked. She was grateful when Gerald slowed and bowed to her.

"Here we are," he said. He grabbed one of the double doors that led into the dining room and held it open for her.

Emmeline offered him a thankful dip of her head and passed through. "Thank you, Gerald."

Just as swiftly as the man had appeared, Gerald was gone, and the door clicked closed behind her. Emmeline was left alone facing the large dining table that was now adorned with the first course of food. She immediately noticed that Harcourt was not the only person awaiting.

Harcourt rose as did a man Emmeline had never seen before. She gave him a curious look. He was tall, tall enough indeed that Emmeline felt almost small in comparison. His long dark hair was tied back with a ribbon.

Harcourt waved his hand toward the newcomer. "Forgive me for not warning you ahead of time, Sister, but we have a guest. This is my dear friend Lord Torrington. We went to school together."

He gave her a smile that Emmeline supposed must have been quite heart-breaking if she were a woman easily swayed by such things. His dark brown eyes held joviality that made Emmeline smile back at him.

“Not at all, dear brother. Meeting your friends gives me insight into the man you have become.” Emmeline’s eyes stayed on the duke. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace.”

“And I you,” Lord Torrington said with a dip of his head. “Although, I do not know that I can take credit, nor would I want to for helping your brother become the way he is.” He gave Emmeline a wink, to her amusement.

Harcourt cleared his throat and indicated that they should sit down. Emmeline hastened to her chair, which a servant held out for her. Once they were all seated and served, Harcourt asked, “Did you have a good rest?”

“Yes. I meant to tell you that I found Jasmine to be a most helpful lady’s maid. She was quite lovely.” Emmeline picked up a piece of potato on her fork and took an inquisitive bite. The spices were milder than the cook at home used, but it was still quite good.

Lord Torrington looked over at her, but Harcourt was already speaking. “She is a good worker. Speaking of lady’s maids, I wanted to let you know that I have arranged for you to have help in preparing for the season.”

Emmeline did not know what to say, so she merely dipped her head in acceptance of her brother’s words. The mention of the coming season had dampened her good mood, but she tried her best to fight off the sense of gloom that settled over her. After all, it would not do to embarrass her brother in front of his friend.

Lord Torrington eyed Emmeline curiously. “Your accent is Scottish, is it not?”

“Yes,” Emmeline said with a blush. “My mother was from Scotland originally, but I am sure that my brother has told you all of this.”

The duke nodded as he sipped his wine. “He has told me some, but after years in England I am afraid he has lost that lovely accent that you still have ownership of. I had begun to wonder if he had just made the ancestry up.”

“Hold off there,” Harcourt said. There was no real anger behind his words, and Emmeline smiled at the two friends over the top of her glass of wine. They seemed very fond of each other Emmeline

decided, as the two men bickered.

Emmeline looked back down at her plate and the meal of beef roast in front of her. She tuned out the men's ribbing of one another, as a good lady should. After all, it was not her place to be in such discussions, even if they chose to have them in front of her. It was one of the pieces of advice from her mother that Emmeline found easy to take to heart, as she had little interest in the jabs they sparred with.

"Lady Callum, do you not think your brother could use a port in the Indian Ocean?" Emmeline looked up at the mention of her name. Lord Torrington and her brother were eyeing her with interest.

Emmeline lifted her shoulders helplessly. "Does he?"

"Lord Torrington is insistent that I bring my cargo ships, at least some of them, into his arena so that I might transfer his spices at a more affordable rate," Harcourt explained. His eyes left hers and went back to Lord Torrington, who looked completely at ease as he leaned back in his chair with a smile. "However, as I also explained to Nash, I have quite enough business in the Caribbean for the time being."

"Nash?" Emmeline repeated.

Lord Torrington chuckled. "Forgive your brother his manners. He is referring to me."

"Oh," Emmeline said with a frown. "Well, if my brother has his business well in hand, why would he benefit from bringing ships to the Indian Ocean, if you do not mind my asking, Lord Torrington?"

Harcourt was the one chuckling now. "She got that from our mother."

"I do not hold an inquisitive mind against a young lady. It is a good thing to be keen upon understanding one's world." The duke breathed deeply as if pondering how to explain before he continued. "I think it would benefit your brother by opening up new avenues of trade. He would not have to take his whole fleet out of the Caribbean spice market, but it could be a good investment to stave off any potential slow times."

Emmeline took a sip of her wine as she listened to the man's explanation. "In theory that seems a good plan. However, are they not in the same market here at home? If the market slows in one part, it

will slow all over. Should he not invest in a different market to ward himself against such things?"

"True," Lord Torrington conceded. "The spice trade is generally a strong one, however. What I meant was if some blight or other should affect yields that his income would be protected by being in multiple environments."

There was no flaw to that particular logic, so Emmeline merely nodded.

Harcourt sighed. "I simply do not think that I want to try to persuade my crews to move seas. Some of them have families in the Caribbean and would not be favourable to it."

"Ah, the family man," Lord Torrington said with a grin. "Some of them have families here at home as well. We could combine efforts and create a new company together, which would share the risks."

"It does not seem much of a risk, if you are merely combining two fleets. Why would you need my brother's ships if you have your own?" Emmeline sat back as a serving girl came to collect her plate, followed by another girl with a plate of greens coated in a sweet vinaigrette.

Harcourt motioned to one of the young women. "Would you ask them to bring dessert as well? We can serve ourselves."

The young woman dipped into a quick curtsy and hurried out of the dining room. "Still rushing dessert?" Lord Torrington asked the question with a one-sided grin that only earned him a glare from Harcourt. The duke's eyes flashed over to Emmeline. "To answer your question, after your brother's sweet tooth interrupted the conversation, I do have a fleet, but he has far too many ships in the Caribbean for the output of the islands. We could use those extra ships to take on the cargo that my ships have to leave behind. Think of the profit wasting away in fields or storage. We do not get nearly as much in the local Indian markets."

Emmeline cut her eyes over to her brother. To be truthful, Harcourt did not look opposed to what his friend was saying. "Then I wonder why he does not assent. That has to be a question left solely for him."

"Hear, hear," Harcourt chimed in as he raised his glass and took a sip

of his wine.

Lord Torrington snorted. "I see the family resemblance now."

Despite Harcourt's instructions that they could serve themselves the dessert, two serving girls brought a cake. One carried the cake and one carried plates and utensils. Harcourt's eyes followed them greedily as the girls sliced the cake up, placing a slice on each plate before passing the plates of dessert around the table. Harcourt took his plate with a grin. "It looks delicious."

"I'm sure the cook will be pleased to hear that, Your Lordship," the older girl said. Harcourt waved them away and they quickly took their leave back to the kitchens.

Much to Emmeline's amusement, Harcourt pushed his plate of greens away and pulled the cake to him. It was Lord Torrington who remarked upon Harcourt's dismissal of his vegetables. "How do you hope to raise fine strong children by teaching them to forgo their vegetables in favour of cake?"

Harcourt narrowed his eyes at his friend as he sliced off a piece of the cake with his fork. "I do not see any children at this table. Nor do I expect to see any until I get family affairs in order. So at least for the time being, I can indulge as I wish."

"Family affairs meaning me, I suppose," Emmeline said before she could stop herself. She instantly regretted it. The conversation had put her at ease, and Emmeline had let her guard down.

The men turned their heads to look at her. Harcourt spoke to her much as their father had when she had stepped her foot out of line. "As a matter of fact, Emme, you were exactly what I was referring to. It is my duty to see you properly married, and I intend to do so. However, I do wish to pursue my own marriage one day."

Harcourt looked as if he might say something else, but a male servant popped his head into the room. "Forgive the intrusion, Your Lordship, but there's a letter for you at the door. The gentleman insists that you take it personally."

Sighing, Harcourt shoved himself up from the table. "It is probably that dratted Grissom. He is forever sending me correspondences, and I have to sign for them. Excuse me." Harcourt left the room, and

Emmeline felt as though perhaps he had taken the air with him, for she could scarcely breathe from the embarrassment of the way her brother had spoken of her.

“Harcourt lacks tact. However, his mention of the season makes me dread it all the more,” Lord Torrington said, as if he had picked the words right out of her head.

Emmeline eyed him curiously for a moment before she whispered, “I know what you mean.”

“Do you really? Does any woman?” Lord Torrington’s question brought her eyes up to his face. He was eyeing her with equal curiosity. He laid his fork down on his plate as if he were giving her his full attention. “It seems to me that most women I meet simply cannot stop talking about the season, with its balls and parties.”

Emmeline’s finger played with the base of her wine glass. “Perhaps, then, I am not like other women. I do not think that I will enjoy it much.”

“Why is that?” He asked the question with what seemed genuine interest, but Emmeline hesitated to respond. When she made no move to explain, he continued, “I do not look forward to it simply because my family, specifically my mother, has attempted to match me with every eligible lady that can be found. Mind you that is a lot.”

She eyed him for a long moment. “And yet you have found no match. Does the fault lie with the young women or with yourself?”

To his credit, Lord Torrington did not seem offended at the question. He smiled with a light laugh. “I would say the fault lies more with myself. I simply do not have the time or energy for it. My strengths need to be focused on business at present. But my mother has set her mind that she shall have her grandchildren within two years.”

“She does not give a young lady much time, does she?” Emmeline laughed behind her hand primly.

Lord Torrington agreed with a tip of his head. “She rather thinks that breeding should be done quickly. I sometimes wonder if it would be an injustice to visit her upon some poor woman.”

It was at that moment that Harcourt came in. “That Grissom is at it

again. I swear, the things he sends me through correspondence could be all settled with one quick word at our next meeting.”

“Some people like the written word,” Lord Torrington said.

Harcourt sat back down and took a sip of wine as if to settle his nerves. His eyes came to rest upon Emmeline, much to her dismay. “I do hope that you have not set your mind against finding a husband this year, Sister. It really is for the best of everyone involved.”

“I am not against finding a husband,” Emmeline assured him.

Harcourt obviously took her words as a complete agreement to be obedient, as he nodded along with her.

Emmeline let the men pick up their conversation about trade as she toyed with the chocolate cake in front of her. She was suddenly quite homesick, but it would be some time before she saw the hills of Scotland again. Emmeline drew in a soft breath, and she eyed her brother. He was indeed very much a stranger.

Chapter 2

Nash walked up the steps to Pentworth Manor. His thoughts were on business matters. As he approached, the door opened and, to his surprise, Harcourt stepped out. "Did I catch you about to make your escape?" he asked, turning on his heel and accompanying his friend.

Harcourt grunted. "You are one to make jests about running away."

"True, I do not have much of a leg to stand on. But I am perfectly honest about how I feel concerning my mother's constant matchmaking. You, on the other hand, have the joy of being the matchmaker. Does that not please the great Harcourt?" Nash fell into step beside Harcourt and they walked towards the carriage house and stables.

Harcourt's hand rose into the air and he curled his fingers into a fist to shake at the clouds. "That I have been shackled with such a lot is a harsh punishment."

"A punishment well-deserved, if my memory serves me correctly. You were a sinner with the best of them at school."

The look Harcourt threw his way was a mean one. It only made Nash smile all the brighter. He nudged Harcourt with his elbow. "Come on, old man. Surely your sister has not got the best of you. She seemed reasonable enough."

"It's the whole bloody thing, Nash." Harcourt stopped at the stable entrance and bellowed inside, "Adam!"

A youth came scrambling out of the stables, managing to sit his hat on his head before stopping and bowing to the men. "Yes, Your Lordship?"

"Were you asleep again?" The question from Harcourt held suspicion, and Nash wondered how many times the young man had been caught sleeping.

Adam gave his master a sheepish look. "A little, Your Lordship. I had to cover Max's shift last night because he's still laid up in his bed with sickness."

“Very well,” Harcourt said with a sigh. He waved his hand at Adam’s clothing. “Tuck your shirt in. I have a letter for you to deliver to the Marquess of Wilbury.”

Adam quickly did as he was told and took the letter Harcourt held out to him. “I’ll deliver it right away, Your Lordship.”

“See that you do.” Harcourt frowned as Adam took off towards the horses at a run. Nash waited and eventually Harcourt turned. They headed back to the house. “I have to set up a luncheon with the marquess. He has pull for getting some of the harder to obtain invitations.”

Nash grinned. “You sound very excited. I thought that you adored making deals and getting the better of people.”

“Business is one thing. The result in this particular game is to be tied to these people forever via my sister. Believe it or not, there are very few people in society that I am thrilled to be weighed down with.” Harcourt stomped back up the steps and yanked open the heavy door.

“Is it just dinner invitations that have you in such a dire mood?” Nash asked as he followed Harcourt into the entrance hall. The doorman bowed to him, and Nash hardly had time to acknowledge him before Harcourt was down the hallway.

No matter how many times Nash came to Pentworth Manor, the servants always stumbled over themselves to bow or curtsy at him. He supposed that it had to do with his stature as a duke, but he hardly found it efficient to stop folding laundry to curtsy. Nash inclined his head to yet another maid as he went down the hall after Harcourt.

Harcourt did not stop his mad bull-like stampede through the house until he arrived in his study. He collapsed into the leather chair behind his sturdy wooden desk. “Do you fancy some brandy?”

“I would not turn my nose up at it,” Nash replied, sinking into another chair that sat in front of Harcourt’s desk. There was a faint smell of smoke still lingering in the air. It reminded Nash of his father’s study, which always smelled of smoke and leather.

Harcourt shook his head. “Be grateful that you have no sisters.”

"I do not know if that is something to be grateful for. It could be worse, you could have a younger brother." Nash took the tumbler of brandy that Harcourt held out to him.

"I would take ten brothers in the place of a sister," he scoffed, lifting his drink and downing half of it in one gulp.

Nash chuckled and shook a finger at Harcourt. "I do not think that is true. Besides, younger brothers tend to think themselves capable of getting in your business far more than sisters do. Thankfully, my brother is much younger and I rarely see him outside of visits to the country estate or when my parents come to stay."

"Speaking of your parents, how are you coping with having them under your feet?" The smile on Harcourt's face looked a little too pleased when he asked the question.

Nash narrowed his eyes at his old friend. "Ah, wanting to share the misery, eh?"

"Regale me with your stories and make me feel better about my sorry fate." Harcourt leaned back in his chair with his tumbler of brandy cradled in his hand like a cherished babe.

With another chuckle Nash nodded his head. "Truthfully, you know how I feel about my mother being constantly around to tug my leash like some errant dog." He took a sip of brandy and sighed. "Do you know that before I left today, I just so happened upon my mother having a nice luncheon with a young lady that she introduced to me?"

"Ah, the ol' ambush. It is an ageing manoeuvre, yet an effective one." Harcourt's lips quirked up a bit in a smile. "I do not suppose that you succumbed to such tactics."

Nash shook his head and tapped the arm of his chair with his knuckles. "I am not so easily ensnared. One should know how to cut the rabbit free and just take the loss. But Mother is not one to be dissuaded."

"I am enjoying how you have gone from errant dog to crippled rabbit in a snare," Harcourt said with a grin.

Nash tutted. "Wait until it is your turn to be at the season and to have women throw their daughters at you."

"I am rather looking forward to finding a wife, actually. That is, if I can ever find my sister a husband." Harcourt frowned and slumped back in his chair. "I had not realised that she had grown so tall."

There was a moment of silence as Nash contemplated his friend, who was wallowing in misery. "What is so wrong with her being tall? It puts me in mind of a Greek goddess. Perhaps that is how you should brand her, your very own Aphrodite."

"It is a fine thing for you to jest, Nash. A fine thing." Harcourt's voice was filled with disapproval. "It would be hard enough to get a man to take on an estate in Scotland who is not already fond of the place. Now I shall have to find some giant of a man who is willing to take on a wife of Greek stature."

Nash could not help but laugh at the images Harcourt's words brought to mind. "I do not think many men would mind a Scottish estate, especially one that was not lacking for land. She has a fair amount to bring to the table, and a quick mind."

"Men do not seek quick minds, Nash, and you know it. Sell it all you like, but there is no way to make my sister more amicable to suitors." Harcourt looked as though he were resigned to a horrible fate as he sat contemplating the upcoming London season.

Nash blew air out of his mouth and gave up reasoning with his friend. "I would rather not go through this coming season at all. Perhaps if I injure myself somehow... Do you think a broken leg would get me out of dancing?"

The snigger from Harcourt turned into actual laughter as he looked at Nash's face. "You are serious? I had no idea you were so determined to not marry."

"I do not hate the idea of marriage. I just do not wish to do so this year. There are business matters will require much of me, and I would prefer to give my whole attention to the fleet and trade at the moment." Nash shrugged. He took a sip of his brandy. "Of course, Mother does not understand such things. She only wishes for grandchildren."

"Your father perhaps could intercede?" Harcourt sat up, finally showing a bit more interest in the conversation than his own woes. He

sat his brandy down and eyed Nash curiously.

Nash grumbled. "My father will not intervene with my mother's plans. She has him completely wrapped around her finger."

"I have heard that this does indeed tend to happen in marriage. So, you will find a bride. It is not the end of the world."

With a sigh, Nash disagreed. "If I find a bride, it will be on my terms. I have not yet lost this war."

"How will you evade your mother then? Shall you stay here until she assumes your death?" Harcourt's voice held far too much amusement and Nash glared back at his friend.

"I just might."

Nash stayed through most of the day as he was able, but work often called. His mother had begun to pester him even when he was at the office, much to his irritation. It was one thing to press him when he was at home, but quite another for her to venture to his place of work to nag at him. To Nash's great annoyance, his father seemed to think it endlessly amusing.

"Mother, this is not the time. I have to write this correspondence, or we might all be in the poor house next spring. Is that really your aim?" Nash looked over his quill at the woman who stood before him.

His mother's hair was pinned up under a hat that held flowers and looked completely impractical to Nash. The woman watched him with eyes that bore into him, nagging him with guilt from his childhood, tiny hands folded in front of her clutching her handbag. "Forgive me, Lord Torrington. I had no idea that your mother was such a burden upon you."

Nash sighed and put the quill down. He pinched his nose to ward off a rising headache. "Mother, what is it that you are here to accomplish?"

With no hesitation, she produced a card from her handbag. "The Marquess of Daventry has requested a luncheon." She placed the card on Nash's desk with a smile. "I am sure that you will have plenty of business to discuss with him."

“And I assume he has a daughter of eligible rank and age,” Nash supplied.

His mother’s smile was quite pleased. “Does he? It never came up.” She took a deep breath and sighed happily. “Well, it has been lovely to see you, son of mine, but I have to go and meet up with your father. He wants to look at some new suits.”

Nash knew that his father had little to no interest in fashion, but he nodded to his mother’s words. “I hope you two have a pleasant and productive day, then.”

“You will not forget your luncheon?”

Nash picked up the card and eyed it with doubt. “Of course not, Mother.”

“Very good.” She inclined her head to him and blew him a kiss before bustling out of the room leaving behind the faintest scent of whatever that flowery perfume was that she wore.

Nash tossed the card onto his desk with disgust. He rubbed his temples and eyed the letter he had been attempting to write. With resignation, he picked up his quill and started again. His mind was far away from shipping rates and bank notes, but he tried his best to focus.

It took far longer than it should have to get the letter written in a satisfactory manner. He set it aside to dry while his eyes went back to the card. He should get ready for the luncheon as he could not fail to show up after his mother had made the appointment for him.

“Charles,” Nash called, and the valet came in with an expectant smile on his face. “Would you fetch my jacket? Apparently, I have a luncheon to attend.”

Charles gave a quick bow and was quickly out of the room with a hurried, “Yes, Your Grace.”

When the man returned, he held out the jacket so that Nash could slip his arms in. “Is this thing on straight?” Nash motioned with a hand at the cloth wrapped around his neck.

“Almost, Your Grace.” Charles set to work with sure fingers and quickly got the cravat back in its original shape. “There you go. Good as new.”

Nash took a deep breath. “Grab my hat. I am eager to get this over with.”

Charles fetched the hat off of the rack by the door and handed it over. “Shall I stay here, Your Grace, or will you require my aid?”

“I do not think I shall be that long,” Nash said with a frown. “Might as well save yourself the pain of it. Go get a nice lunch from that kitchen around the corner.”

Charles smiled. “I might just do that, Your Grace. Are you certain that I can’t aid you somehow?”

“What is there to do? I am sure they will have servants fawning over me. I simply hope that some trade comes of it so that it is not a wasted luncheon.” Nash had been introduced to the marquess once before, but their paths had not crossed much since then. He tended to stay out of the country, which was just as well. Nash had no great desire to be roped into endless visits to their estate just because of an introduction.

Charles’ voice brought Nash out of his thoughts. “I fear you do not look as if you want to go at all, Your Grace.”

Nash chuckled. “You would be right about that, Charles. I would prefer to join you in the kitchen and have a meat pie, if I am truly honest.”

Charles put his hand on Nash’s shoulder. Nash did not mind the intimate contact. Charles had been his manservant for long enough that Nash felt as though the man were a trusted friend. “I shall save you one just in case the food is as undesirable as you think the company will be.”

“You are a good man,” Nash said, placing his hat upon his head.

Charles went to the door and opened it. “Do you wish me to run to the carriage house for you?”

“No, I think the walk will be nice. It is a rather mild day and the later I get there, the earlier I can leave.” Nash winked as he walked out the

door, leaving Charles to laugh at his joke.

The street was full of noise. Nash looked around at carriages that clacked along the cobblestones. The sound of seagulls drifted in from the docks that were only one street over.

He had been contemplating a sea voyage to personally inspect the holdings in India, but with his mother's schemes, he feared it would be poor sailing weather by the time he got a chance to embark on such a journey. There was little he could do except play along with her game for the moment. If he did get a bride, then his mother would be a little less of an issue.

The only problem with getting married was that then his wife would be the problem. Wives were not problems that simply went away unless a man was truly unscrupulous. Nash thought of all the horrible ways he could get rid of a wife, but he was smiling.

His boots made a satisfying crunching sound on the stones where he walked. He kept a watchful eye on the carriages and other pedestrians. Carriages had a nasty habit of going up onto the footpaths when it suited them.

At the carriage house, he tossed a coin to the boy standing outside to ensure he was the next person served. The boy grinned at Nash. "Hurry along," he told the boy, who quickly dashed off.

Once the carriage was brought around, Nash set off to the townhouse of the Marquess of Daventry. He preferred riding on horseback, but had no desire to fight the flow of traffic through the busier streets. It would be just as well to let the driver earn his fare.

The townhouse was situated on a fashionable street that boasted enough noble names to make it a popular spot to be seen. Nash spotted several ladies and their maids out for walks, with their frilled umbrellas held aloft as if the weak sunlight might somehow damage them. He looked out of the window as his carriage pulled up in front of the house.

A servant came out to open the door for him. "Your Grace, His Lordship is expecting you in the conservatory." The man was clearly the butler, Nash decided as he stepped out of the carriage. The butler snapped his fingers at a boy who was standing near the top of the steps holding open the door. "Daniel, straighten your shoulders."

Nash held back a chuckle as Daniel tried his best to do as he was told. Nash walked through the door with a dip of his head at the young man. Inside the building, the butler beckoned Nash to follow him. "This way, if you will, Your Grace."

The corridor demonstrated one thing to Nash, the marquess's wife had been responsible for decorating. The soft hues and delicate scenes of flowers evoked springtime. At the door of the conservatory, Nash waited while the butler stepped inside to introduce him.

Nash entered and gave the marquess an incline of his head. "Lord Daventry, it is a pleasure to see you again."

Lord Daventry rose to greet him and bobbed his head up and down. "Your Grace, it has been too long since our acquaintance was first made. Where has the time gone?"

"I imagine that we have both been delayed in our visits by matters of business." Nash waved off a servant who came to take his coat. The weak sunlight that lit the conservatory did little to warm the room.

Lord Daventry cleared his throat and looked over at the door. "How remiss I am," he lamented. "Allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Heaton."

Nash had been expecting it and did not even show a flicker of surprise as he turned to find the young lady rather beautifully adorned, and not at all looking as though she had been taken aback at finding a nobleman with her father. Nash inclined his head to her politely as he waited on her father to finish the introduction.

Lord Daventry smiled broadly. "My darling daughter, allow me to introduce Lord Torrington."

Ah, there it was, Nash mused in his head. The formal introduction had been made, and now he would be stuck giving deference to the woman every time they happened to cross paths. "Lady Heaton, it is lovely to make your acquaintance." He kept his hands in front of him grasping the hat he had removed on the lady's appearance, but made no move to reach out to the woman.

Lady Heaton curtsied prettily enough, her eyes darting over to her father as if looking for approval. "As it is to meet you, Your Grace. I

hope I am not intruding.”

“Not at all,” Nash said benevolently. “Your father and I had not yet got into the droll talk of business and trade.”

Lord Daventry slapped his hand on his knee. “Well, let us put that talk off a bit longer. Come let us partake of the lovely luncheon my cook has prepared. Shall you join us, Daughter?”

“If it does not offend, His Grace,” Lady Heaton said, as her eyes went over to Nash.

The hopeful gleam in the young lady’s eyes made him feel slightly ill, but he nodded with a smile. “I can see no offense to be had by your presence.”

Lord Daventry looked pleased as he ushered his daughter and Nash to the table, which was set with sliced meats, fruits and vegetables. Nash longed again for one of those juicy meat pies that Charles would no doubt be biting into even now. He put a smile firmly on his face as he set about enduring the company of the conniving father and daughter.

The young lady, for her part, seemed pleasant enough. But the situation put a bad taste in Nash’s mouth, which flavoured even the food with his dislike. The tea was of a bitterness that was probably more in Nash’s irritated mind than in reality. Perhaps he would be poisoned, he mused silently as he nodded at something Lord Daventry was saying.

“It really must be most stressful to be striking out to pursue new trade deals,” Lord Daventry said.

“I find it to be rather enjoyable.”

“You are not a man after me then. I prefer the desk to the open sea.”

“There is something to be said for both situations, but I find I miss travelling the waters. Plus, in my business, it pays to keep a close eye on far-flung holdings.” Nash took a sip of the tea that tasted sweeter now that the topic of marriage was not being thrown at him.

Lord Daventry slapped the table with his hand, which made his daughter flinch. “That is the truth. What with all these conflicts about, it is a wise man who keeps a keen eye out for signs of trouble.”

“We are not going to talk of war, are we?” Lady Heaton looked like she might just flee as she asked the question.

Lord Daventry chuckled and put his hand protectively over her hand on the table. “Do not fret. We shall steer away from such topics around you.” His eyes went over to Nash as if to seek his assistance.

“Of course,” Nash agreed. “Such things are not for the delicate.”

Lady Heaton looked visibly relieved at their words. “Thank you, Your Grace and Father. I fear that I am not much for such things.”

“As a lady should not be,” Lord Daventry assured her with a pat on her hand. He quickly turned his attention to the piece of thick bread that he was piling up with meat as he spoke to Nash. “How are ships faring, Your Grace?”

Nash shrugged lightly. “Well enough. We have not run into any major issues.” He glanced at the woman, who was nibbling at an early season strawberry. “What is it that you enjoy discussing, Lady Heaton?”

The young lady smiled at the direct attention from Nash. “I very much enjoy needlework and painting, Your Grace.”

“Those are fine hobbies,” Nash said with a nod of his head. He picked up a strawberry. “Where did you find strawberries so early in the season, Lord Daventry?”

The marquess grinned and leaned over the table as if to spread conspiracy. “I bring them from our country estate,” he whispered. “Our gardener is quite a genius when it comes to bringing the fruit early.”

“You had better hang onto him, then,” Nash said with a chuckle. “A man with a green thumb like that is a rare gem.”

Lady Heaton sat eating quietly so as not to interrupt them. It was the way most young ladies tend to be taught, and Nash was grateful for it in that instant. At least, if he could keep her father talking, then he would have to interact with her minimally.

Nash thought he might actually get through the luncheon without

having to give any assurances to the woman for the coming season, but her father was more of an astute man than he proclaimed himself to be. As Nash rose to take his leave, Lord Daventry spoke up. “We will look forward to seeing you this coming season, Your Grace. My daughter is scheduled to be debuting this year.”

“I am certain she shall have no problem filling up her dance card,” Nash said with a generous smile at the young lady, who beamed at the compliment but daintily hid it behind her hand.

Lord Daventry nodded. “Yes, she has already received visits from several young gentlemen who wish to get their names in good standing with me ahead of the balls.”

Nash knew what Lord Daventry’s game was, but little did he know that Nash was not playing. Nash inclined his head. “Well, I am certain that I shall see you both during the season.”

It was not an offense. It was not a slight. It merely was an acknowledgment. Lord Daventry knew it as it was and had no choice but to just nod along with him. Nash bowed to Lady Heaton. “I wish you the best in your endeavours, Lady Heaton. Lord Daventry, thank you for a lovely meal and a fine conversation.”

“Thank you for attending us, Your Grace,” Lord Daventry said as his daughter curtseyed.

Nash left the Daventry residence feeling light. He had evaded his mother’s trap, and he had done so without directly slighting anyone. Part of him wondered just how angry his mother would be once word reached her that Nash had not thrown himself at Lady Heaton’s feet to beg a place on her dance card. The idea made the ride back to his office a pleasant one even with the shouts of pedestrians and the frequent stops that marked the peak traffic time in London.

Chapter 3

Emmeline peered at herself in the mirror on her dressing table. Harcourt had commanded her to go shopping, but she had no enthusiasm for such things. She knew precious little of fashion, especially the kind she was supposed to exemplify if she were to succeed in the London season.

“Are you still fretting, Miss?” Jasmine came in with two dresses over her arm, which she placed into Emmeline’s closet.

“I know it seems absurd, but Scotland feels like a distant world from London. What is fashionable in London hardly figured into my life before this moment.”

“I understand,” Jasmine said with a comforting smile as she finished her work. She turned to Emmeline. “I suppose His Lordship is not as understanding.”

Emmeline gave a harsh laugh. “My brother thinks I am insane. Apparently, all women should want to go shopping and gossip. I fear I am not a woman by London standards.”

Jasmine grinned broadly. “Oh, Miss, you are certainly a woman. Now, not all women are as pre-occupied with such things. Perhaps it is your brother who is misguided.”

“No. I fear he is right. That is the worst part.” Emmeline shook her head. “What shall I acquire? What shall I need? Do I need a dress for every ball? Are there certain materials that I should avoid?”

“I am afraid that I can’t help you with that, Miss.”

“This is my problem,” Emmeline said with a dramatic sigh. “I shall go fling myself at my brother’s feet and beg his mercy. Perhaps he will send me away to a convent.”

Jasmine tried to hide a laugh, which made Emmeline smile. “My apologies, Miss.”

“No. It is good to laugh. After all, I am being quite silly about it all.” Emmeline lifted her arms in a helpless gesture. “It is just going to

some shops and getting measured and such. What is the big commotion? Nothing.”

Jasmine came over to stand beside Emmeline. She eyed her in the mirror. “Anything that is new is bound to be a bit hard. His Lordship will understand, and he might even help.”

“Perhaps,” Emmeline said with a frown. She drew herself up. “I shall go see him at once.” She set off to find her brother before she could second guess herself. She cornered the butler in the foyer. “Gerald, have you seen Lord Pentworth?”

“He is in the library, My Lady,” Gerald said with a dip of his head. “It is down this hallway to the right.” He waved his hand towards a hallway that seemed to go under the stairs that led to the floor above.

Emmeline smiled. “Thank you so much, Gerald.” She set off trying to picture herself as bold and brave. It had worked when she was a child, and it seemed to help a touch now.

Her bold adventure led her to the lair of her brother. The library was a wide room with books stretching toward the ceiling all the way from the floor. “Harcourt,” Emmeline called out.

“Ahoy,” called her brother’s voice and Emmeline looked up to see him halfway up a ladder peering at a book. “What is it that I can do for you, Emme?”

Emmeline up at him. “I have come to talk to you of this shopping trip you have me assigned to undertake.”

“What about it? Surely you can have nothing against shopping?” Harcourt said as he came down the ladder with a book in his hand.

She followed him to a desk in the corner where he deposited the book. “Shopping is all well and good, but I am afraid that I must confess that being from Scotland, I have very little knowledge of what is fashionable here in London.”

“Ah.” Harcourt looked at her, but she could see no particular annoyance in his face. “Remember when I said that I had arranged for you to have lady’s maid for the season?”

Emmeline nodded slowly. “I thought you just meant that I could have

use of Jasmine.”

“Jasmine is a good worker, but what I actually meant was that I had hired you a French lady’s maid to help you adjust to London life. She should be here later today, actually. She was held up, or she would have been here sooner.” Harcourt sounded almost apologetic. “I thought you had understood that I meant someone other than my household, but I now see that I was not clear. You do not have to worry about shopping until she arrives.”

A wave of relief flooded through Emmeline. “That is lovely to hear,” Emmeline admitted with a laugh.

Harcourt asked, “Was there anything else that you needed?”

“No.” Emmeline turned around to look at the books that lined the walls. “I have not visited the library yet. May I pick a book out to read?”

Harcourt waved his hand at the books along the walls. “Feel free to indulge yourself, although I do think the library is a bit lacking in romantic titles.”

“I rather like philosophy,” Emmeline assured him, walking off to examine the spines of nearby books.

He cleared his throat causing Emmeline to look back around at him. “I do trust that when it comes time for the balls and introductions that you will endeavour to let your ladylike virtues shine through, Sister.”

“Oh,” Emmeline whispered. “I had not realised I was unladylike. I know that society here is different than at home, but I had not thought it so foreign.”

Harcourt’s voice held very little tenderness as he spoke. “I do not mean to seem harsh, but I must ensure that you make a good match. I intend on not letting Mother and Father down in that respect.”

Emmeline lowered her head. Her voice sounded small even to herself. “On second thoughts, I think I shall retire for the time being. I am too tired to read.” She brushed past her brother on her way out, not allowing him time to say anything else. It took all her willpower not to run down the hallway as she fled back to the safety of her room.

She fell forward onto her bed as soon as she was behind the closed doors of her room. The sunlight trickled in through the thin gauzy curtain. Emmeline looked at the heavy drapes held to the side by soft cords. She understood what it was like to be tied. She went to the drapes and freed them. They swished closed, and Emmeline stood holding the cords in her hands in the darkness of her room.

Emmeline tossed the cords aside and crawled back on to her bed, not caring about the wrinkles she was putting into her dress or the hairpins she might be prying loose. She curled in upon herself and held onto her blanket.

Why did her mother insist on letting her be of her own mind? It would have served her better, Emmeline wagered, to have been taught to not think at all. She wondered if that was what all London women of society were like.

The season had only been a source of stress for her because she had feared that her brother might not allow her to choose freely, or perhaps she might not have a good fashion sense. Now it seemed she had much more to worry over. Her height she could do little about, but now it was clear that her brother thought her some ill-raised and best-forgotten kin.

Emmeline sighed and rolled on to her back. "Mother would be upset to see me brooding so," she chided quietly. She lay there thinking of all the ways she had embarrassed herself since she had come to London. Slowly her eyelids grew too heavy for her to keep open.

She drifted off into a tumultuous nightmare of balls full of contemptuous guests who glared at her as she stumbled over her words. Emmeline fled from frowns and gasps of fair ladies at her mention of philosophy. She dared speak out of turn, and she saw Harcourt thrown into ridicule because of her.

Emmeline awoke clenching the blanket tightly. There was a soft knocking at her door. She sat up and looked around. The room was still shrouded in darkness, with only tiny pinpoints of light squeezing through the crack between the drapes.

She slid off the bed and went to the window. The drapes were heavier than she recalled. She fumbled to tie one of them back to let light back into the room. "Just a moment," she called in response to the insistent knock on her door.

Emmeline hurried over to the door and pulled it open to find a woman she had never seen before. As she took in the newcomer's appearance, it was clear that the woman was also taking in *her* appearance. Emmeline realised she must look frightful.

Her hand quickly went to her hair that she could tell was falling. "Oh no," Emmeline whispered. "I fell asleep." The excuse sounded as lame to her ears as it probably did to the perfectly coiffed woman staring at her with obvious judgment.

"That is plain to see," the woman said with a breathy French accent.

Emmeline's stomach dropped. This was the French lady's maid Harcourt had hired for her. She had certainly not made the best impression on the maid, but then perhaps it would serve to show the woman just why Emmeline needed her help so desperately. "You must be the lady's maid that Lord Pentworth said was due in."

"And you must be Lady Callum," the maid said, dipping her head forward to acknowledge that Emmeline was correct. "I can see why he was concerned."

Emmeline felt colour rise to her cheeks. "Honestly, I am normally more properly groomed. I merely fell asleep."

"Are you ill?" The maid enquired, stepping forward, forcing Emmeline to allow her entry into the room. Emmeline quickly stepped out of the way, and the maid swept through with the swish of ruffles and the scent of roses.

"No. I am not ill."

"Then why do you sleep in the middle of the day?" It was obvious that the woman did not approve of such things by the way she asked the question, but it was not unheard of for a lady to have a nap in the afternoon.

Emmeline flipped her hand over in a gesture of helplessness. "I was merely tired. It is not that odd of a thing for a woman to take a light nap."

"This bed looks like it was more than a light nap," the maid waved her head at the rumpled blanket. "Never mind it now." She put her

hand on her chest and took a little breath as if putting herself back in sorts. “My name is Francesca Durant, My Lady. I shall be accompanying you shopping and helping you to prepare for the upcoming balls.”

Emmeline nodded and tried to put the woman’s remarks out of her mind. “I am looking forward to learning about fashion from you. To tell the truth, I received very little education on fashion in Scotland.”

“Well, it is Scotland,” Francesca said, as if she dismissed the very idea of it.

Emmeline felt her pride flare up, but she pushed it back. She felt sure this woman would probably report back most anything she did directly to her brother. Emmeline had enough woes without Harcourt thinking she was going against his wishes.

“We shall begin first thing in the morning with our shopping. This evening, I had hope that you would talk to me of the fabrics and colours that you like to wear,” Francesca said. She turned towards the curtains. With a few graceful movements of her nimble hands, she had the drapes tied up so neatly that Emmeline was certain there was some sort of magic involved.

Emmeline sighed. “I like simple dresses. I am not much on overly complicated layers of lace and ruffles. I like modest necklines and comfortable fabrics.”

“In fashion, not everything is about comfort,” Francesca said before tapping her chin. “We can see what we can do to get the best of both worlds though. You will need a new handbag, some hats, and jewellery perhaps. We shall buy all of that last, as we want to make sure that it complements your new wardrobe.”

The maid might not be overly likable, but Emmeline was grateful that she seemed to at least have a good grasp on what a lady of society would need for a season in London. That was far more than Emmeline could say for herself. She nodded along with the woman.

Before long, Francesca was pulling clothes out of her wardrobe. The dresses were laid out on the bed and discussed until Francesca felt that she had a firm grasp on what Emmeline’s likes and dislikes seemed to be. Once all the dresses were put up neatly once more, Francesca turned her attention to Emmeline’s accessories, of which

she had brought scarcely any.

“You came all the way to London with only one necklace?” Emmeline might as well have said she had run to London naked by the expression on the maid’s face.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Is that really a problem? I only ever wear the one necklace.” Emmeline pulled her heart pendant out from under her collar. “My mother gave it to me when I was just a child.”

“I understand that jewellery can hold great sentiment, and it is a lovely piece. However, it will not be appropriate to wear it every time you step outside. It simply is not done.” Francesca shook her head in much the same way Emmeline’s tutor at home had when a subject was over and not to be discussed again.

Emmeline took a deep breath. She would wage that particular war another day. Right now what she sought was more in the way of food. “Perhaps we should take a break. It must be time for the evening meal.”

“I had Cook instructed to bring our meals up here. I feared we would be here for some time,” Francesca informed Emmeline.

Emmeline squared her shoulder. “Excuse me?”

For the first time, Francesca bowed her head to Emmeline. “Forgive my boldness, My Lady. I merely wanted to get started right away. The season is only weeks away. If we want to get the dresses sewn in time, we shall have to know what we are going for before we even step foot in the shops.”

Emmeline softened at the woman’s reasoning. She had to be tired as well, yet Francesca was trying so hard to be ready for Emmeline’s sake. “No. It is I who should be forgiven, Francesca. I am acting like a child while you are here going without rest after your long journey.”

“I am fine,” Francesca assured Emmeline. “You mentioned that you like modest necklines earlier.” When Emmeline nodded, Francesca continued, “I think with the fashion this year that you will find a wide selection to wear without having to compromise on that. The English are much more conservative than the French in that respect.”

“I do hope that I find something to wear that will not involve too

many corsets,” Emmeline said with a touch of fear. Her mother had worn corsets, and the whole process looked terribly uncomfortable.

Francesca laughed lightly and waved her hand dismissively. “Corsets are not in use as much as they were. You should be pleased with the number of dresses meant to be worn with just petticoats and such.”

Over the next week, Francesca made Emmeline endure countless trips to the dress shop. Emmeline felt certain that they were equipping the whole of London with dresses and not just herself. Surely there was no call for so many for one person?

She sat in the garden on a stone bench. She had been surprised when Francesca gave her time to sit around thinking for certain that the woman should be putting her through etiquette lessons or some such nonsense.

It was not that Emmeline was ill-mannered. In fact, Emmeline had been instructed on proper etiquette by tutors and her mother throughout her years. Yet somehow, the closer the balls and parties of the London season came, the more she felt like some ill-bred and poorly-raised slug.

“Well, you were not the family member I was looking for,” a male voice said in amusement.

Emmeline looked up and put her hand up to ward off the sunlight that glinted through the trees. “Your Grace,” she said in surprise at the sight of Lord Torrington peering at her curiously. “If you seek my brother then I am afraid that I cannot help. I do not know where he is either.”

“I am sure he is around somewhere. Gerald seemed to think he was and if anyone should know, then it is the butler.” Lord Torrington started to turn, but then he paused. “What are you doing out here all by your self?”

Emmeline sighed. “Enjoying the moment, but I suspect that my lady’s maid will be along soon to whisk me away to more dress fittings.”

“Such is the lot of a woman,” Lord Torrington said. He gave her a bow. “I shall retire and let you get back to your peace of mind.”

She inclined her head in gratitude before the man turned on his heels and headed back toward the house in search of Harcourt. Emmeline leaned her head back and looked up at the skies. The light, fluffy clouds that floated by did so with little concern for the little humans below and Emmeline regarded the clouds with a smile.

Despite Emmeline's certainty that Francesca would be along soon enough to find her, the woman failed to appear. Emmeline went inside in search of some tea and a bite to eat. She found Jasmine and asked the young woman to bring her tea into the library.

Emmeline was sitting in the library curled up in one of the oversized chairs reading a book of poetry when Jasmine came in with the tray of tea and biscuits.

"Thank you," Emmeline said happily. She sat up and put her book aside as Jasmine set the tray down on the table beside Emmeline's chair. "Won't you join me? I do so hate eating alone."

Jasmine quickly assented and took one of the dainty teacups for herself. She made up two cups of tea and handed Emmeline one before taking the other for herself. She then settled on a soft stool that she pulled over near the tray. "Are you enjoying your preparations?"

"Hardly," Emmeline admitted. She sighed and added, "I guess it is not so bad. Francesca is helpful and with her around it has gone swiftly. Far more so than I could have done on my own."

Jasmine nodded. She leaned forward. "I saw Francesca earlier, Miss. I thought you were perhaps with the gentlemen as I saw Francesca headed that way."

"Gentlemen?" Emmeline frowned.

Jasmine whispered, "She always seems to pop up when Lord Torrington is around. I assumed she might have been doing so on your behalf."

"No," Emmeline shook her head. "His Grace is just my brother's friend. If she is doing so, then it is without my permission. I shall speak to her about it."

Jasmine blanched. "Please, don't mention that I told you. She is scary

at times.”

Emmeline could not help but laugh at the look on Jasmine’s face. “I know exactly what you mean.”

After tea, Jasmine went off to help in the kitchens. Eventually, Francesca turned up to look for her in the library. “Ah, there you are, My Lady.”

“Did you not find me in the study?” Emmeline made the enquiry while she peered over the top of her book of poetry.

Francesca looked confused. “I do not understand.”

“I saw you heading towards the study earlier and assumed you had gone to see if I was with my brother.” Emmeline shrugged. “I was just in here reading and enjoying a bit of the quiet.”

Francesca cleared her throat and ran her fingers over her long black braid as if to assure herself that her hair was still perfectly in place. The woman’s dark eyes considered Emmeline curiously. “I saw Lord Torrington. He seems to visit His Lordship often. Why do you not use that acquaintanceship to your advantage?”

“I do hope that you are not going around the duke to whisper my name to him. I have given you no indication that I wanted you to do so.” Emmeline shut her book and put it down.

Francesca stared at Emmeline for a moment before she dipped down into a curtsy to her. “Forgive me, My Lady. I fear that perhaps I am overly zealous. I do not mean to offend you.”

“It is quite fine,” Emmeline assured her. “Just please do not harass the duke on my behalf.”

The maid inclined her head to concede to Emmeline’s command. “Very well, My Lady.”

“Thank you.” Emmeline stretched. “Do not take this for me being ungrateful, but what do I owe to the day off today?”

Francesca smiled. “I merely had to have a bit of rest. I think my journey and the long hours since have caught up with me.”

“Well, I think it is a well-deserved rest then. Shall we be back preparing tomorrow?” Emmeline wished the woman would declare that they would not be, but she knew she had to keep up appearances. It would not do for her appear ungrateful for all of Harcourt’s generosity.

Francesca assured her, “We shall. Now if you will excuse me, My Lady, I am going to freshen up before the evening meal.”

“Of course,” Emmeline said as she stood up. She had been sitting so long that she was stiff. Her muscles cried out at her, but Emmeline waited until Francesca left the room to stretch.

She probably needed to freshen up as well. Emmeline made her way up the stairs wondering not for the first time who had decorated the walls in this manor house. Had her mother or another female relative done it? Her mother had never mentioned the house, or really much of any of the English estate. Despite that, Emmeline was certain the woman had to have been at them all at some point.

Her mother had liked to stay in Scotland. It was her home, as the woman was fond of saying. She, like Emmeline, had been born in Scotland. Perhaps that was why Emmeline almost felt more Scottish than English.

She thought back to the driver who had brought her into London. She had at the time been offended because he had treated her as though she were not a true English lady. Was she a true English lady?

Emmeline pondered the thought. She washed her face in the basin in her room and peered at her reflection. Her hair had a gleam of red amid its honey-blond strands. Her mother had said it was her ancestral roots showing through, but Emmeline thought it more her father’s light brown hair’s influence. Indeed, Harcourt’s hair looked very much like their father’s hair had with its light brown tones.

She patted her face dry and fixed a few strands of hair that had strayed out of place. Jasmine popped in through the door from the adjacent room. “Do you need some assistance, Miss?”

“No, not really,” Emmeline said with a smile at the young maid over her shoulder. “I just wanted to freshen up.”

Jasmine was about to respond when there was a knock at the door.

Francesca called from the hallway, “My Lady, may I enter?”

“Come in,” Emmeline called.

Francesca came in, and Emmeline saw the woman’s bright smile dim just a bit when she spotted Jasmine. “I was just coming to aid you in getting ready for the evening meal.”

“That is not necessary,” Emmeline said with a wave of her hand.

Francesca gaped at Emmeline. “My Lady, do you not wish to apply some colour to your cheeks or change clothing?”

Emmeline faltered and looked at her reflection again. She did look a bit plain. “Do you think it necessary?”

“I know that it is only an evening meal with your brother, but Lord Torrington is also here. You might not have interest in him as your husband, but he has leverage with other members of society. He could aid you in securing invitations to exclusive balls, My Lady.” Francesca’s words rang true, even if Emmeline did not want them to.

Emmeline had been viewing Lord Torrington as a friend, her brother’s friend, and only as that. He was a powerful ally to be sure, and she might need his help if she was as hopeless as Francesca and her brother seemed to think. “You are right. I should have thought of it.”

Jasmine whispered, “I think you look lovely the way you are.”

“She might look well enough to marry a peasant, but she will need to look like a princess to marry above her station.” Francesca clucked her tongue at Jasmine. “Do go help with the meal preparations, child.”

Jasmine beat a hasty retreat out of the room. Emmeline frowned. “I do wish that you would not talk to Jasmine so. She is a dear girl, and she means well.”

“I apologise, My Lady. I just do not want her simple ways leading you astray. My one concern is helping you get the best match possible. That is why your brother hired me, after all.” Francesca gave Emmeline a smile. “I promise that I will try to be kinder to her, but she really should learn her place. It is better for her that way.

Emmeline did not like it, but she did not have to. There was little she

could do to change the way things were, and she might as well start getting used to it. She just needed to endure the French maid's presence a bit longer and then perhaps, once she was more confident, Francesca's presence would not be necessary.

She sat down at her dressing table and allowed Francesca to apply cosmetics to her face. Emmeline did not simply sit back though. She paid close attention to what the woman did and tried her best to remember how to make her face up for herself. In essence, there was not much difference in how Francesca applied the cosmetics, except perhaps she was more liberal with the colours and the quantity.

Emmeline noticed a mark on the woman's arm as she moved. "What is that on your arm?"

"What?" Francesca asked.

Emmeline turned and waved her hand at the spot on the woman's upper arm.

Francesca covered the place with her hand almost as if she were self-conscious of it.

"I did not mean to offend you," Emmeline said. She truly had not meant any harm and guilt welled up in her. She had not seen the beautiful maid hide much about herself and it was such a tiny spot. "Is it a birthmark?"

"No," Francesca said with iciness.

Emmeline tried again. "I am sorry. I was only curious, Francesca. Is it an old injury? I have a scar above my knee where I fell as a child."

"Yes, it is an old injury. It was one I would rather not speak of, if you do not mind, My Lady," Francesca's tone might have been polite, but there was tightness in her voice.

Emmeline simply nodded and hoped the woman would forgive her intrusion. She had not known it would be such a sore topic for her. How could Emmeline have known?

The words seem to hang between them as Francesca finished making up Emmeline's face. It would be a long evening if the woman was going to be cold to her all night. Emmeline suddenly very much did

not want to go to the evening meal, even if she was starving.

“There,” Francesca said with accomplishment. “What do you think?”

Emmeline stared at her reflection. “I do not even look like myself.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” Francesca asked as she put everything away.

Emmeline shook her head. “I suppose it is not.” Francesca had already moved away and was laying out a soft dress. Emmeline stood up and allowed the woman to assist her in getting dressed. She supposed that her day dress was probably fairly sweaty and dirty.

“There,” Francesca said, pulling the laces and tying the dress. “The only thing left is your hair. We should at least brush it.”

Emmeline allowed Francesca to brush out her hair then pin it back up. She had to admit that by the time the woman was done, she looked remarkably better than she had when she’d started out. Emmeline admired her reflection.

“Thank you, Francesca,” she said.

Francesca bent forward in a graceful bow to Emmeline. “It was my pleasure, My Lady.”

The two of them went down to the dining room together. “Are you sure that you are not interested in His Grace?” Francesca whispered the words to Emmeline as they walked.

Emmeline laughed lightly and spoke quietly. “Honestly, I have not even given it any thought.”

“Perhaps you should. He is here often, and it would make getting to know him far more comfortable. You seem to not like having to be on display.” Francesca shrugged lightly. Her own black and white dress was representative of her station, but somehow the woman managed to make it look far more than simply a uniform.

Emmeline smiled and agreed with a nod. “I am not fond of any part of being on display. But it would be a shame not to get to wear any of those lovely dresses we are having made.”

“That is true,” Francesca said with a smile.

One of the male servants rushed over to open the door for them as they reached the dining room. Francesca gave the young man a demure smile. It impressed Emmeline how much sensuality the woman could put into something as simple as a smile, and she knew she had a lot to learn.

Thanks to Francesca’s words about the duke, Emmeline’s eyes went to him, and she saw him in a different light. Could this man truly be a husband to her? She wondered what he even thought of her. He had always been kind to her, friendly even.

“There the ladies are,” Harcourt said as he stood up. “Emmeline you look wonderful. Does she not, Your Grace?”

Lord Torrington rose with Harcourt at their approach. Emmeline watched the man’s eyes pass over Francesca before settling on her. Emmeline knew that in comparison to the exotic beauty of Francesca, she had little to offer. But she did her best to smile. He gave her an incline of his head.

“I do think your brother is right, Lady Callum. You look lovely.” Lord Torrington looked at Harcourt. “And you worry that she will not find a match?”

Emmeline smiled at Francesca, who gave her a nod of approval before they took their seats.

Harcourt moved his eyes to Lord Torrington. “Shall we eat?”

Lord Torrington bumped the table with his fist. “Hear, hear.”

The serving girls were quickly around the table delivering plates. Emmeline was delighted to see the meat pie that the girl sat before her. “What sort of pie is this?” she asked warily of her brother.

“I think it is lamb,” Harcourt replied. He looked at Lord Torrington. “She is wary of our English ways.”

The sound of Lord Torrington’s chuckle made Emmeline blush. “I merely wanted to know if it has any organs in it. I have grown distrustful of what people call meat pies.”

“You should venture down to the kitchen near my office,” Lord Torrington said as he broke open his pie so it could cool a little. “They have the most marvellous meat pies. I go there at least once a week. More if I can manage it.”

Emmeline smiled. “It must be nice having somewhere near your work to go and eat. Do you work from your office often?”

Francesca bumped Emmeline’s elbow. Emmeline met the woman’s eyes and she knew that she had probably broached a topic she should stay away from. Lord Torrington did not seem to notice.

“As often as I can get away with if my parents are visiting,” Lord Torrington said with much amusement.

Harcourt shook his fork at him, but the duke did not seem to mind that either as he laughed merrily. “Honestly, you are supposed to set a good example.”

“What good would that do? Society consists of two kinds of people, those who care about the rules and those who can see their way around them.” Lord Torrington clearly was more in the latter category, Emmeline wagered.

Harcourt laughed and asked, “How did your talks with the marquess go?”

“That man did not have anything useful to say. It was merely a ruse to get me into an acquaintanceship with his daughter. Why he should care about that is beyond me. She clearly has more than enough prospects as is.” Lord Torrington shrugged and picked up a piece of his meat pie with his fork as he spoke. “I apologise for my manners, Lady Callum. I am merely tired.”

“No need to apologise,” Emmeline assured him. “I think if people were constantly shoving their daughters at me that I would be quite tired of it too.”

Harcourt called, “Here now. Can we all talk with some decorum?”

“What is so wrong with what I said?”

Lord Torrington took a bit of pie and seemed to be enjoying the ensuing debate, but not eager to add anything else to it. Harcourt

rubbed his temples. "It was just a bit forward, Emmeline. Do you need lessons on such things?"

"Of course not," Emmeline said with a sigh. "I would not say such as that outside of this room, but we are all acquaintances here, and I do not see the harm."

Lord Torrington nodded, but Harcourt glared at him. "Let us just eat, shall we?" Harcourt looked down the table at Emmeline, who nodded meekly.

Over the next week, Emmeline did her best to be on her best behaviour, especially when Harcourt or Francesca was around. It was tiring, but she had to make sure that neither of them had any reason to think that she was not going to do as Harcourt wanted. If her brother thought she might sabotage her season, he might very well simply accept the first marriage offer that he was met with no matter who it was from.

The thought that she might end up married off to the first person to bat their eyes at her made Emmeline physically ill. There were only a couple of weeks before the season started, and she was so close to making it to at least the first ball. All she had to do was demonstrate that she could actually make a good showing.

Emmeline was so lost in thought that she ran directly into Lord Torrington as he came around a corner just down the hall from Harcourt's study. She let out a little yelp as they collided.

"Are you well?" Lord Torrington braced her with his hand on her arm. "I did not expect to find you behind that corner."

The deep rumble of his laughter made her laugh at herself as well. "Nor did I expect you there," Emmeline countered. "I was merely on my way to the kitchen."

"My deepest apologies," Lord Torrington said, letting go of her arm. "Now that we are sure we are both unharmed, I had better get back to my office."

Emmeline nodded and stepped aside to allow him to go by her. "Have a good afternoon, Your Grace."

“And you, Lady Callum.” He gave her a bow before he was off toward the front door of the house.

Emmeline had gone only a little way down the hallway when Harcourt came out of his study. “Emme,” Harcourt said as his eyes fell upon her. “I had a letter today from a Sir Mitchell, who wishes to court you. Mind you, he’s a merchant so it would be a poor match for you. Still, he is quite adamant.”

“I do not even know him,” Emmeline said with a frown. “I do not really wish to marry someone I do not even know, Harcourt.”

“Of course not,” he said, waving off her concern. “Courting helps people get to know each other, Emme.”

Emmeline felt dread well up inside her. Was this it? She was not even going to get to go to her first ball. “You said it is not a good match. Should you not wait and see if I make a good showing?”

Harcourt nodded. “I shall,” he agreed. “I merely wanted you to know. Most girls are excited to get their first courtship offer.”

“Most girls are not worried about being sold off to the first bidder,” Emmeline said to her brother. “I am sorry,” she immediately added. “I am just nervous. I have worked so hard with Francesca to get ready for my first ball. I am looking forward to it.”

Harcourt seemed to soften. “I imagine most young ladies are nervous about their first ball. But you will do well.”

And if she did not do well, then she had an offer from a merchant, Emmeline mused to herself. She put on a smile and nodded. “If you will excuse me, Brother, I was on my way to get some tea and a bite to eat.”

Harcourt nodded and continued on down the hall. Emmeline looked after him for a moment. She wondered what would happen if he got an offer from someone who was of the right status to be a good match. Would Emmeline even get to meet him before Harcourt had her courting?

She was far more subdued. When she reached the kitchen she found Francesca and one of the other maids sitting at the table. They both

looked up at her as she came into the room. The younger maid, who Emmeline was only vaguely familiar with, took off as though she had been caught doing some great wrong.

Emmeline frowned. "Did I scare her?"

"She scares easily," Francesca said with a laugh. "Come and sit. You look as if something is wrong."

Emmeline dropped down heavily onto the stool that Francesca waved to. "What is the matter?"

"I saw my brother, and he told me I had an offer of courtship," Emmeline said with disgust.

Francesca pursed her lips. "What is wrong with that?"

"It was from a merchant I have never even heard of." Emmeline shook her head.

Francesca patted Emmeline's shoulder. "Breathe. Men do that sometimes, especially if they are not hopeful of finding a good match during the season. They try to circumvent the system and weasel in. Your brother is a smart man. If it is a bad match, he will shoo them away."

"I just wish he had not even told me of it." Emmeline shivered, hoping to shed the memory.

Francesca clicked her tongue. "You must not let such things worry you. You will do your best, and you will have a good showing. Now, is your brother attending the ball with you?"

"Yes," Emmeline said with a nod of her head. "He is going to chaperone me."

Francesca smiled. "That is very good. Will you require my aid?"

"I think I shall be fine. You have helped me so much that I would not impose more on you. Besides, the invitation is only to me and my chaperone."

Emmeline could tell from her face that Francesca already knew this. "It would not be proper for me to go, I just wanted to make sure that

you were comfortable.”

“You are kind. I wish you could go, but that is just the way the rules are,” Emmeline smiled at her. “I think there is a picnic next month that allows us to bring servants. You could come to that.”

Francesca gave Emmeline a bright smile. “You are so sweet to worry after me. I shall be fine.”

“It is not as if the balls are that fun from what I hear.” Emmeline smiled. “I just hope that I actually find someone to dance with.”

“I am certain that your dance card will be very full.” Francesca offered her a hug. “Now, I am dreadfully tired, so I think I may try one of those English naps that you are so fond of.”

Emmeline laughed lightly. “Sleep well,” she called after the woman. Francesca lifted a graceful hand as she walked down the hallway. Emmeline sighed and propped her elbows on the table.

Cook came through. “Hello, Dorothea,” Emmeline said brightly.

The woman’s face lit up. “I thought I heard that French woman out here.”

“Oh, Francesca just left to have a nap.” Emmeline shrugged. “I was wondering if I could pester you for some tea. If you will just point where everything is, I can get it myself in the future.”

Dorothea shook her finger at Emmeline. “You’ll do no such thing in my kitchen. Ladies do not run around stirring pots. You’ll get grease on your new dresses!”

“This is a very old dress,” Emmeline pointed out.

Dorothea rolled her eyes. “You mind my words, Miss.”

“I will, I promise,” Emmeline said as she raised her hands in surrender.

Chapter 4

Harcourt's mood seemed markedly improved upon receipt of the offer of courtship for his sister, perhaps a little too much improved for someone who claimed to have no interest in actually accepting the offer. Perhaps the man's sister was not too far removed in her fears that Harcourt might just throw her to the first man who made an offer.

"I will be so glad to see this season come and go," Harcourt said even as he smiled.

Nash narrowed his eyes. "What do you have to worry over?"

"Getting my sister a decent match." They were sitting in the study smoking after the evening meal. "Will you be staying the night?"

Nash stretched out in the leather chair and sighed heavily. "I might," he said at length. "It would mean at least one breakfast without mention of balls or dance cards."

"Now, Mrs. Prichard always said you were a remarkable dancer when we were forced to take lessons at school." Harcourt's grin told Nash that his friend remembered quite vividly how much Nash had despised those lessons.

Nash grumbled, "As if she knew. She was deep in her cups most days."

"Still, you never had a problem with the dances." Harcourt drew a long puff off of his cigar, which he let out slowly.

Nash grunted. "Being able to dance does not equate to enjoying it, Harcourt. You should know that."

"I like dancing fine. I never get to, mind you, but I like it well enough. You still adamant in holding out until next year to find a bride?"

If only things were that simply, Nash mused to himself. "What I want and what my mother wants do not line up and I have a feeling that, no matter what I want, she will get her way."

"What is she going to do? Sneak in with a priest in the middle of the

night and marry you off while you sleep?"

"I put nothing past her. She has tricked me into six luncheons and two dinner guests in as much as two weeks. I might be engaged before the first ball ever begins."

"Oh, I am sure that you can keep yourself away from the altar if you see fit to do so." Harcourt leaned on the desk and whispered, "Mind you, Miss Durant has been hanging on a lot as of late."

Nash groaned. "She grates on my nerves. French or not, I cannot stand a clingy woman."

Harcourt sniggered. "If it makes you feel any better, she has done the same thing to me."

"I am not sure that cheapening it helps in any sort of a way, but thank you for that," Nash said with a laugh of his own.

Harcourt raised his arms helplessly and then scooped up his tumbler of brandy. He took a sip and sighed in contentment. Nash looked at his friend. "You are the one who wants to get married. I shall trade places with you, and you can get married in my stead."

"I think your mother would notice the difference between us," Harcourt pointed out.

Nash scoffed. "You underestimate how much she wants grandchildren."

"You have said yourself you do not mind getting married."

Nash had to agree that was true. He nodded and conceded with a wave of his hand. "Yes, but I want to get married on my own terms. Besides, I would rather focus on business at the moment. Marriage has a way of disrupting things."

"Honestly, you act as if marriage is the end of your life," Harcourt said. "You can get married and still conduct business."

While that might hold true in some instances, it would be certain to spell the end of his trips to India. "I would like to finish inspecting holdings before my future wife decides to keep me at home by giving birth to a child every other year."

"I often wonder what happened in your childhood to make you so against marriage." Harcourt mused. "I can see where a wife might not want you gallivanting all over, but you are a duke, Nash. You really should not be doing that stuff yourself anyway."

Nash slapped his hand on the leather chair arm with a loud sound and a sting that crept up his arm. "You sound like my father."

"I do not go to see my holdings personally, Nash. I have people who do that sort of thing." Harcourt looked at his empty glass as if it had betrayed him.

"You are the last of your line, Harcourt. I am not. I have a brother and a half-brother. I have cousins. If I die, someone else gets the title."

"Oh, well why did you not just say so?" Harcourt teased. "I suppose your mother would not mind that at all then."

"There is no talking to you." Nash leaned his head back against the leather seat. "You are not going to just ship your sister off to that merchant?"

Harcourt snorted with laughter. "He is a pitiful little thing, but every offer makes her that much more attractive to the next fellow. So, he has helped us out by trying to swoop in before the first ball."

"I wonder what he looks like," Nash pondered.

Harcourt's brown hair shook with his laughter. "I swear, Nash, your mind must be a glorious mess."

"It is," Nash assured him. "I am serious though. If he thinks so little of his prospects at the ball, surely it cannot all be based solely on his income potential or status. I have known of some lowly men landing powerful women and vice versa. So, he must not think much of himself."

Harcourt nodded as he poured another tumbler full of brandy for himself. "I do not think much of him either. So that makes the two of us even."

The day had started out quite bright and clear, but as Nash neared his home, the clouds grew a little darker. From his knowledge of the people living within, that seemed to be quite poetic and correct. He rode leisurely along the road towards his home.

The threatening clouds were not nearly as much of a worry as the woman that was surely pacing inside as she waited to pounce on him. Despite his slow gait, he still had to eventually dismount and hand the horse off to the stable boy, who ran up eagerly to take the reins. Nash gave the boy a smile. "Make sure you brush him well, Nicholas."

The boy bobbed his head as he walked the horse to cool the stallion down, leaving Nash to face the double doors of his home without reinforcement. Nash breathed deeply of the water-laden air that hung around him. He wondered if he could just stand here and how long it would take for anyone to realise that he had done so.

With a shake of his head, he took the stairs two at a time and reached for the door. Before he could grasp the handle, the door came open, and his mother stared out at him with stern disapproval. "Good morning, Mother," Nash said with an exaggerated bow.

"Where have you been?" Her hands were clasped together so tightly that her knuckles were turning white.

Nash spoke gently and soothingly so that she did not strangle him. "I sent a messenger to let you know that my discussion with Lord Pentworth ran longer than expected. I simply spent the night as his guest."

"My Lady, where would like me to set up your breakfast?" The cheerful form of his mother's maid Gretchen came into view. She gave Nash a curtsy. "Good Morning, Your Grace."

"And you as well, Gretchen," Nash said with gratitude for the woman's interruption. He slipped past his mother while the maid had her attention.

His mother's voice called after him, "I should like to talk to you, Nash!"

Nash raised his hand to let her know that he had heard her. "Let me refresh myself, and I shall come to attend you," he called back to her as he hurried up the stairs.

Upstairs Nash slipped out of his jacket, and before he could get his shirt unbuttoned, the door to the adjacent room opened and his valet Charles came to his aid. “Your Grace, I thought I heard you.”

“Hard not to hear me when Mother sees fit to yell up to the very timbers of the roof,” Nash grumbled. Charles’ sure fingers quickly got the buckles and buttons undone.

Charles suggested with a smile, “Perhaps if Your Grace would stop and talk to her instead of hoping to get out of earshot?”

Nash could not help but laugh at the man’s expression. Charles was older than Nash, but he had a quit wit and gave fair advice. “That might be good advice if I were wanting to hear what my mother was saying.”

Charles shook his head as he folded the clothes Nash discarded and set them neatly aside to be cleaned. “What suit would you like to wear today, Your Grace?”

“I think the grey striped one that I had tailored this winter,” Nash said as he refreshed himself with a splash of water from the basin that Charles took care to make sure was always refilled.

“An excellent choice, Your Grace.”

Nash watched the valet retrieve the suit from his wardrobe. Charles held it out for Nash’s final approval, which he gave in the form of a nod. Charles swiftly set about getting the suit ready to be worn by laying out the various parts so they were easily found.

Eyeing himself in the mirror placed on the wall, Nash asked, “Have you seen my father today?”

“I think His Lordship has gone to meet up with some of his fellows,” Charles said.

“Lucky man that my father is,” Nash muttered. “He can go where he pleases.”

“He has earned that right, has he not, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” Nash had to admit. “Still, he is supposed to go out to the

country estate and check on things. That is supposed to be the one part of the estate that I do not have to worry over, yet I received a letter just the other morning stating that there were repairs needed after a storm.”

Charles hummed but did not answer. He held out Nash’s shirt, and once Nash had his arms into it, Charles set about making sure that the shirt was buttoned and that the seams were lying properly. Nash knew the man was listening, but Charles was focused on his work.

“My brother is due to take over the estate that originally belonged to my mother when he comes of age. At his rate, it might fall down before then.”

“I have the utmost confidence in your ability to oversee the estates, Your Grace, as do your parents,” Charles said as he fixed Nash’s cravat. He turned and picked the jacket up off the bed, holding it out.

Nash slid his arms into the jacket, watching himself in the mirror as Charles placed the jacket onto his shoulders properly. Charles went to the wardrobe to fetch some boots, and he returned as Nash sat down in the wooden chair before his side desk.

“Do you wish your hair to be fixed, Your Grace?” Charles asked as he allowed Nash to slip his feet into the boots.

“If you must. But all I really want is to get out of here and get back to work.”

“Well, a man smartly dressed will accomplish more than one stumbling over his own sloppily tied shoes, Your Grace.” Charles deftly laced and tied Nash’s boots before he set about combing out Nash’s hair. “I heard that the short fashionable hair is quite in this year.”

“Mother would faint if I cut my hair,” Nash said with a smile. “Besides I like my hair long, just as my father’s hair was, and his father before him.”

Charles bowed his head respectfully. “It is a traditional way to honour one’s family, Your Grace.” He brushed out Nash’s hair before tying it back with a grey piece of what looked to be leather to Nash. When Charles motioned that he was done, Nash gave himself a final glance in the mirror before nodding. “Shall you go and meet your mother

now, Your Grace?"

"You had to go and spoil my breakfast, Charles," Nash grumbled.

Charles chuckled as he turned to grab his favourite hat, in case it started to rain. "Think of it like a thorn, Your Grace. It will sit there and cause you pain the longer you ignore it."

"I despise that you are right, but I also fear you might be wrong. My mother is a most persistent thorn. I do think that if I plucked her out, she would simply find somewhere else to stab me." Nash left the room with a shake of his head. Charles came along behind him. "Charles, will you bring my breakfast to the study? I need to go over some ship manifests that have to be approved today."

"Right away, Your Grace."

Nash opened the door to his study and saw his mother waiting. She held a cup of fragrant coffee aloft. "Ah, there you are Nash," she said with a smile. "I thought this might be the most likely place to get a word in with you."

"I have a large amount of work to be done this morning, Mother," Nash warned. "Could this not wait?"

She frowned. Her voice held that low tremble that told Nash she had had quite enough of his foolishness. "It simply will not wait. Now shall you sit, or shall I stand?"

Nash fought to keep from rolling his eyes. He had no desire to test his mother's mood this morning. There was no doubt that any further arguing would only delay her leaving. "What is it that is so urgent?" Nash put his hat down on the desk and sank down into the well-worn leather cushions of the old desk chair.

His mother offered him a smile over her coffee cup. She took a slow sip of the liquid as steam rose. "I know you were not too taken with the marquess and his daughter. Frankly, I had my doubts about those two. But you simply must choose someone, Nash. Surely not every young lady of society has some great folly against them?"

Nash frowned at her. Luckily the door opened, and Charles appeared with Nash's breakfast tray. "Forgive me for intruding, Your Grace," Charles said upon seeing Lady Sutton seated in front of her son's desk.

“Not at all,” Nash said with a wave. “Just put my tray down on the desk here, and you may go see to your own breakfast, Charles.”

Charles dipped his head and set the tray down as he had been instructed. As he stood up to leave, Charles gave Nash’s mother a bow before he exited the room. “I always liked him,” she said with a smile. “What I meant by my words earlier, Nash, was that if you would merely tell me what you like in a woman, then I could put my mind to use finding you a proper match instead of simply introducing you to every eligible lady in London.”

“I do not think such a lady exists,” Nash said in amusement. He eyed the tray of eggs, fruit, and a warm porridge that, as a child, he had liked to put his fruit in. He started with the eggs and a sip of the coffee. “If I told you that I wanted a quiet woman, you would pick a sweet, demure sort, which only means that the girl is shy. Once she was not shy, she would then babble on and on.” Nash tapped his fork against the dish containing the fruit. “What I want, Mother, is a woman who will not prattle on about foolish things but instead has a mind for business and the world around her.”

Lady Sutton sighed as she placed her coffee cup down on its saucer, which sat on Nash’s desk. “A woman is a woman, Nash. She will not act like a man. The sort of woman that you describe is more like Countess Dewitt. A woman of such a mind has no need or want of a man.”

“I would settle for one who knew her own mind. The marquess’s daughter, for example, could not even respond to questions without looking to her father.” Nash shook his head as he picked up a piece of what appeared to be a peach that had been cooked in sugar. “You are of a quick mind, Mother. Can you not find a woman like yourself?”

A smile spread over his mother’s face. “That is a very nice thing to say, Nash.”

“It is true,” Nash said simply. “I am still not aligned with this idea of getting married at the moment. But at the very least I would appreciate a woman who can stand on her own feet.”

Lady Sutton appeared to be taking what Nash said to heart. She nodded her head. “You are right. You need a strong partner. I was trying to appeal to a young man with the beauty of a woman’s face.

But what you need is a true partner. I shall see what I can do.”

She stood, and Nash stood with her out of respect. He did not really know what to say. She was still going to be looking for a bride for him, but at least now she might find less superficial ones. To say that Nash doubted that she would find a woman fitting that description easily was an understatement.

Once his mother had bustled out of the room, her maid swooped in and cleaned up the coffee cup behind her. “Pardon me, Your Grace,” Gretchen said with a dip of her head before she was swiftly gone again, as though she had never been there.

Nash sighed. “At least that might keep Mother busy for a few days. I might get some work done.”

He set aside his tray for the servants to collect later and spread out the papers that needed his signature. He had learnt long ago that one did not merely sign things, for there were plenty out there who sought to take advantage of the duchy, including writing in ridiculous amounts for services not even rendered. He scanned the first manifest and judged it in order.

He had gone through three more manifests when there was a knock at the door. “Enter,” Nash called.

Charles came through the door. “I came to see if you were done with your breakfast, Your Grace.”

“Yes,” Nash said as he looked at the paper before him. “Could you have one of the boys from the stables at the ready? I shall need these manifests taken to the shipmaster’s office when I complete them.”

Charles nodded as he picked up the tray. “Of course, Your Grace. I shall go directly there after I drop this off in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.” Nash only raised his hand to acknowledge him briefly as he fought to keep his concentration on the task at hand.

The morning passed swiftly with the paperwork to be done, and soon Nash was handing over the sealed envelopes to be delivered to the docks. “Take care with them. The ships cannot leave without their manifests being registered.” His voice was stern, but the boy on duty had never done this particular task before and Nash wanted him to

understand how important it truly was.

The boy took the envelopes and put them in the leather satchel that was slung across his body. "I'll take good care of them, Your Grace," he said with fervour.

"Go then," Nash said, waving the boy off.

The sound of the lad's feet on the marble floors echoed back to Nash as the boy ran down the hall toward the foyer. Nash sat back in his chair. He could go into the office, but he also needed to send word to the country estate to authorise repairs.

"Charles!" Nash called out. He appeared a few moments later, as though he had been waiting nearby. "I shall need a horse saddled."

"Right away, Your Grace."

As soon as Charles was out of the room, Nash quickly drafted a letter to the manager of the country estate and pressed his seal on the paper to make it apparent to any who asked that the letter was official. He dried the paper over a flame and set it aside to cool while he put away his quill and straightened his desk.

Soon enough, Nash was placing the letter into an envelope that he carried with him to the front door. The doorman held the door open for him. "Thank you, Thomas. Has Charles come back in yet?"

"Not yet, Your Grace."

Nash headed out the door and to the stables, which were a short walk down a path through the front garden. "Charles!" Nash called out.

Charles appeared with a smile on his face. "Your Grace?"

"I need this letter sent to the country estate. Will you see to it?" Nash held the letter out to Charles, who took it with a bow of his head. "I am going out for the afternoon. Should there be need of me, I shall be at the office or Lord Pentworth's residence."

"Very good, Your Grace," Charles said with another dip of his head. "Your horse is being saddled. I shall see about getting this letter dispatched."

Nash nodded. As soon as Charles was out of sight, one of the stable boys emerged with a stallion saddled up for Nash to ride. "Here you go, Your Grace," he said proudly.

Nash patted the horse on the back of his neck. "Thank you," he said as the boy's name evaded him. He liked to call the staff by their names, but they had taken on a few newcomers and Nash had yet to get their names down.

He pulled himself up in the saddle and sighed in relief as he rode away from the house. He normally did not mind being at home. But with his parents visiting, the house had seemed somewhat crowded. The threatening rain clouds were more welcome than the bustle of his household at the moment.

Originally, he had set out to go to the office. But he found himself riding aimlessly. His wanderings brought him to Harcourt's home, and Nash thought that fine. He turned the stallion into the entrance to the modest estate.

A stable boy ran out to meet him. "Shall I stable him, Your Grace?"

"Might as well," Nash said with a nod as he slid out of the saddle and handed the reins to the boy. He was making his way up to the house when a carriage arrived. Nash turned as the footman jumped down and hurried to open the door.

A French accent scolded the footman for placing the step too far from the carriage. "So sorry, Miss." The footman quickly repositioned the step closer and held his hand up to help the maid down.

"My Lady could have broken her neck on that step," Francesca scolded. The footman shrank back, and Nash shook his head. It was then that Francesca spotted Nash. She gasped. "Your Grace, I did not see you there."

"I imagine the drama with the step was very distracting," Nash replied with a wave of his hand.

The footman held his hand aloft to help Lady Callum out of the carriage. He murmured, "My apologies, Lady Callum."

"It is quite well," Lady Callum assured him. He fretted some, but she patted him on the shoulder. "Francesca worries too much. My legs are

much longer than hers.”

Francesca did not look pleased. Lady Callum, however, did not seem to notice. Her eyes lit upon him. “Your Grace, have you come to visit my brother?”

The footman was swiftly back on the carriage, which rumbled away towards the carriage house set off behind the stables. The front door swung upon and the doorman called, “Welcome back, Lady Callum. Have you bags to be retrieved?”

“The driver said he would bring them up, Richard,” she called. “His Grace is here to see my brother.”

Nash laughed. “Actually, she never gave me the chance to say what I was visiting for, but I am here to see Lord Pentworth.”

“Oh, did I not?” Lady Callum looked at Nash, and he wondered if she were jesting or if she truly had forgotten.

Nash waved his hand toward the open door. “Let us not keep Richard standing there, shall we?”

Lady Callum nodded and hurried up the steps. Francesca favoured Nash with a smile. She placed her hand on his arm. “It is good to see you, Your Grace,” she whispered, her soft accent colouring her words.

Nash had little trouble not smiling at the woman. He had been the object of plenty of women’s ambitions, and Francesca seemed just the sort. When he did not return her smile, Francesca gave him a puzzled look before she turned to follow her mistress into the house.

Richard gave Nash a friendly smile. “I shall tell the earl that you here to see him, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Richard,” Nash said as he loosened his cravat. Charles had pulled the fabric a bit too tightly around his neck and it was threatening to choke him.

The ladies had gone upstairs. Nash could tell by the sound of their voices carrying back down the stairs. He could not make out much of what they were saying, but he really should not have been listening at all.

Richard was back a moment later. "His Lordship is waiting for you just outside his study."

"Very good," Nash said. Sure enough, Harcourt was waiting outside the door to his study, fidgeting with a scarf. "Thinking of hanging yourself?"

"Funny," Harcourt muttered. "My valet suggested I wear it. I do not know that I am convinced of its usefulness. I was about to go out into the garden. The gardener has been complaining that there is a tree that needs to be downed."

"Then I shall join you. I have done most of my work for the day. And now I can watch you."

"So kind." Harcourt rolled his eyes and turned on his heel toward the kitchens. They cut through the dining room into a slender hallway that led to a stone patio on the southern side of the home. Harcourt pointed out an oak at the edge of the garden.

"I cannot see anything unusual about it from here," Nash said.

Harcourt sighed. "That is why I was going to walk to it, Nash."

"You always were so clever."

Harcourt looked around at Nash as they made their way along the path that led to the open lawn beyond the flower beds. "You look oddly pleased with yourself."

"I had a word with mother. I do not expect it to halt her progress, but it might slow her down." He hooked his thumbs into the collar of his jacket.

"What did you tell her that would slow her down so?"

"I told her to look for a woman like herself," Nash said with a grin.

Harcourt sputtered out a laugh. "You truly wish for a woman like your mother?"

"I wish for a woman with a strong mind of her own. My mother definitely has that in spades. Do you not think?"

“True, she is a singular sort of woman.”

“A very singular sort,” Nash agreed. “Hopefully so singular that she will not be able to find another woman like herself this year.”

There was a snort from Harcourt. “Now who is underestimating your mother?”

“True enough. She will probably have found me three lovely young, headstrong women by next week,” Nash admitted.

They came to a stop near the oak. Harcourt pushed out his lips in thought as he stared up at the branches of the old gnarled tree. “I had not realised how old this tree was.”

“Looks like it has a bit of a blight on it too,” Nash said, pointing to some leaves that showed tell-tale speckles. “Shame, but it is an older tree near the end of its life.”

Harcourt leaned over and patted the tree’s trunk. “Better to take the one out than to lose all the trees.”

“Have you men ready for the job?” Nash looked at the height of the old tree and calculated how much wood would come from it.

Harcourt nodded slowly. “Yes, my gardener will bring in some. Well, at least there will be no shortage of firewood.”

Nash smiled and slapped Harcourt on the shoulder. “Ever the optimist. Speaking of optimism, how goes your brooding over your chaperone status?”

“My optimism does not extend to matters of women at the moment.” Harcourt put his hands on his hips. “I would rather help them chop this tree down than petition one more invitation.”

Nash chuckled. “You should enlist my mother. She is well-versed in hounding the elite of society.”

“Do not tempt me, Good Sir!” The two of them looked at each other and laughed. “She would probably try to wed you to my sister. Lord knows she is stubborn enough to qualify.”

Nash shook his head, although the mention of Lady Callum made

Nash ponder. Harcourt was fitful to get her married off quickly, but the lady wanted to choose her own groom. An idea started to take shape in his mind.

“Did your brain break at the very idea of my sister?” Harcourt asked the question with a smile on his lips.

Nash grinned. “I was thinking more of my mother’s schemes. You are right. She truly will not be defeated by one obstacle in her path.”

“We are speaking of your mother now, are we not?” Harcourt asked as he turned toward the house.

Nash slipped his hands into his pockets. “Yes, do try to keep up, Harcourt.”

“It is hard, when you leap from one conversation to another so quickly, much like the young ladies that you disparage so.” Harcourt’s words might have been haughty, but Nash took no offense. They had grown up together at boarding school, and he was used to Harcourt’s moods.

Nash shrugged. “By all rights, you should be wedding before me. You are older.”

“I would gladly do so,” Harcourt reminded him. “But I have the pressing issue of my sister’s marriage to attend to first. I do not think that many ladies would like to share their home with my sister. And I am only a year older than you, Nash.”

They weaved their way through the garden where the first buds emerging from the roses that lined the path. “Surely, they would not truly be sharing any sort of home. Your sister has an estate to herself.”

“An estate that I am a steward of,” Harcourt said with a grunt.

Nash laughed. “Fine. But honestly, do you think it will be so hard to find a match for her?”

“You have met my sister,” Harcourt said as they reached the stone steps to the patio. “She has a lovely face, but she often steps out of line with her tongue.”

Nash had noticed that she did not seem much for the rules of

etiquette. "True enough. But there are men who like that fiery disposition in their women."

"I hope so because, apparently, it is ingrained within her. She is so much like our mother that I fear it goes all the way to the roots of her soul." Harcourt shook his head, despairing at the thought.

They made their way back into the house as Nash's mind mulled over the idea of Lady Callum. Perhaps they could be of aid to each other. They might not have much in the way of attraction, but necessity was a powerful ally.

Lady Callum might be talked into a plan to help Nash stop his mother's incessant matchmaking, if he could convince her that she would gain what she wanted most from it. After all, he could offer her exposure and time to find the man she wanted. The more Nash thought on it, the more reasonable it seemed.

Now if only he could find time to explain his plan to the lady in question without that nosy maid of hers overhearing. Francesca would be just the sort to report back to Harcourt any improprieties to raise her stature in the man's eyes. Nash was still pondering when they reached the study.

"You have been quiet. Are you plotting?" Harcourt asked the question with a smile as he held the door open.

With a grin, Nash said, "Perhaps I am."

"See, you should have learned by now that your mother is not someone to be trifled with." Once Nash was through the door, Harcourt went straight to the table that held the liquor. As he poured brandy into two glasses, there was a rumble of thunder. "Sounds like the storm has finally blown in."

Nash took the tumbler of brandy from his friend. "It does indeed."

Chapter 5

Emmeline was admiring the roses waiting on Francesca to come to collect her. The sound of boots crunching on the stones of the path startled her. “Your Grace,” she said in surprise as Lord Torrington approached her, riding gloves in hand.

“Lady Callum. Again it appears that I have stumbled upon you in your brother’s stead.” He inclined his head to her. “It is a lovely day for a visit to the gardens.”

She curtsied as she had been taught. A curl of hair brushed her cheek. She straightened and offered the duke a smile. “After the storm yesterday, I wanted to make sure the roses were unharmed.”

“They look to be doing well.” He reached out and touched one of the delicate buds.

“You do not seem very eager to find my brother, Your Grace.”

“You are very astute. You have found me out.” He chuckled, which was a lovely warm sound from his throat. “I was actually hoping to speak with you.”

Emmeline might have not had much experience with English society, but even she knew that was a bit out of the ordinary. “Is that a proper thing for a man such as yourself to do, Your Grace?”

He could have been offended that Emmeline had dared to question him or, worse, called him out on his mistake. There was no anger on his face as his lips quirked up at the corners into a smile. “It might earn me a reproving lecture from my mother, that is true. However, I thought the risk worth taking.”

“I am listening, Your Grace.” If it were important enough for him to break etiquette, then it must have been something of grave earnestness.

Lord Torrington put his hands behind his back and took a breath as if preparing to say something quite difficult. “You and I,” he said at last, “have goals with which we could aid each other this coming season.”

"I thought you were eager to not participate in the London season at all." Emmeline wished she had not interrupted him, but he did not seem offended.

He nodded. "True. I have made it no secret that marrying this year is not my intention. I would like very much to be able to focus on business and perhaps a trip that I have been putting off for some time."

Emmeline pulled her shawl up over her shoulders. "I fail to see what I can do to help you with that situation."

"I think that I can help you with your problem, actually," Lord Torrington said.

Emmeline narrowed her eyes. He was only slightly taller than her, so she had little difficulty looking into his brown eyes. She could see no deceit in them, but that hardly meant anything. She did not know him well enough to gauge him properly.

"What problem would that be, Your Grace?" She grasped her shawl with one hand, using the other to push her hair from her face.

Lord Torrington's ponytail blew over his shoulder in the increasing wind. He put his hand up on to his hat to prevent it from coming loose. "This might not be the best place to talk."

"Francesca is due to come and collect me soon. If you are to talk, then you should do so." Emmeline did not wish to wait to hear what the man had to say. She had never done well with waiting.

He laughed lightly. "I want to propose a plan between the two of us. It will allow you to pick your husband and take away the threat of your brother choosing without your permission."

"How will this plan work?" Emmeline was not going to agree to anything unless she heard the full details of it. She eyed the duke warily. He had always seemed a forthright man, but she knew that people in society were often full of dark secrets.

Lord Torrington leaned forward so that she could hear him. "If I were to acquire an engagement, an informal one, then my mother would be forced to stop trying to push young ladies upon me. In turn, the lady in question would gain status and admirers."

“But if I am engaged, it would be hard to find a husband, would it not?” Emmeline tried not to blush at the thought of such a thing. This was business, and she would treat it as such. She waited for the duke’s reply.

“It would not be a formal engagement. We could set a time to announce our engagement, but something will come up, and we may go our separate ways.”

“I see,” Emmeline said with a frown. “This is most out of the ordinary.”

Lord Torrington laughed and assured her, “Do not put any duplicity past society. They all manipulate things. We would merely be carrying on that tradition. However, our families would need to believe in the match for it to work.”

“I shall have to think on it.” Emmeline was not about to be pressured into making a quick decision.

He did not look terribly pleased with that, but he conceded with a nod. “Very well. I shall try to speak with you again soon.”

“I think you should be going. Francesca has just come out of the house.” Emmeline looked over at the house and the duke’s eyes followed hers.

He muttered, “Indeed. Please, keep this between us.”

“I would be a fool not to, Your Grace,” Emmeline said with a sigh.

He grinned and nodded. “And a fool you are not.” With his words, he turned on his heel and left.

He was halfway to the stable by the time Francesca made it to Emmeline. “Was that Lord Torrington?”

“Yes. Apparently, he got lost,” Emmeline replied. “Men are strange creatures. Are we ready to go and get our dresses?”

Francesca frowned as she looked toward the duke’s retreating form. “Yes.”

Later that evening Emmeline sat in her room looking at herself in the mirror. The duke's words still rang in her head. She ran a brush through her hair and bit her lip.

"What have you got to lose?" Emmeline asked her reflection. If she did not take the duke up on his unorthodox offer, then she would likely end up married off quickly for her brother's convenience.

Having a duke interested in her would be a great boost to her status and notoriety for the season. Some men might try to woo her out of jealousy, or revenge. Other men, however, might simply look upon her with new eyes, eyes that might have overlooked her otherwise.

Emmeline was still thinking when Francesca came in. "Are you ready for me to braid your hair?"

"I can do it," Emmeline insisted, but Francesca was already taking the brush from her hands. She gave up arguing with the French woman. It was a pointless struggle to convince Francesca that she could do things on her own.

Francesca eyed her in the mirror. "What is wrong with your complexion? Are you blushing?"

"I do not think that I am." Emmeline patted her cheeks and peered in the mirror.

Francesca leaned over and peered at Emmeline's face. "I do hope you are not coming down with some illness. You should not have been out in the damp after the storms."

"I am fine. It is often cold and damp in Scotland. I do not think that I am going to perish from it." Emmeline folded her arms. She sighed. "I do wish you would not treat me as a child."

Francesca sighed heavily. "I only worry for you. With the stress of the season upon you, you seem frail."

"Well, I am not. I am nervous, but that is to be expected." Francesca would not gain any headway into treating Emmeline as though she were coming down with some ailment. "I have told you this before."

The maid shook her head at Emmeline's reflection. "You are so stubborn. It is not a good quality for a noblewoman to have, My Lady."

"I know," Emmeline snapped. "My brother tells me that often enough."

"Oh, do not be angry with me." Francesca knelt down beside Emmeline's chair. "It is my job to make sure that you are ready for the season. What should I do? Not be concerned for you?"

Emmeline looked down at the woman's petite form. Francesca smiled. "I am sorry to be so difficult. It just seems as if my brother is more anxious than I am for all of this. I worry that he will not allow me to choose my husband."

"It is his duty to find you a good husband. It is not his duty to allow you to follow your fancy. What if you choose a husband that is below you?" Francesca shook her head. "You should rely on your brother's wisdom to see you through this. I am sure that he will allow you some say."

She wished she had Francesca's faith in her brother. She had, however, grown up with Harcourt. And while a lot had changed about him, his impatience had not.

"I shall try to listen to his advice. But he barely tolerates my words, Francesca. How can he listen to my wishes when he does not hear them?"

Francesca tapped her arm much as her tutors had when Emmeline was pouting about one thing or another. "Come now, My Lady. You must stop this brooding. It will make wrinkles. And then you will end up with a poor match."

Emmeline laughed. "If only wrinkles were my only flaw."

"You can do nothing for your stature. You must use it to your advantage. Your beauty might be different than others, but you can still bend men to your will." Francesca stood up and shrugged.

Emmeline looked at Francesca with doubt. "I would just be happy not having to bend over to look at a man."

“You do not have to bend over to look at Lord Torrington,” Francesca prodded. The woman had been quite curious and pestering since she spied Emmeline talking with him without a chaperone. She simply refused to accept that it was innocent.

Emmeline sighed and raised her arms helplessly. “I told you that he was looking for my brother.”

“And yet he left right after and did not go to see your brother.” Francesca began braiding Emmeline’s hair, pulling it tightly.

Emmeline winced. “That hurts.”

“Begging your pardon, My Lady.” The tugs grew gentler. “I forget that your head is so tender.”

She sat very still for Francesca to finish. When the woman finally tied off her braid, Francesca stood back to admire her handiwork. Emmeline had to admit that Francesca had done a wonderful job. “It looks beautiful.”

“Thank you, My Lady.”

The woman was a mystery to Emmeline, who had never been around the French, and she had no idea if Francesca was an oddity or a normal example of her countrymen. One moment she was practically gushing over Emmeline, and the next she seemed cold.

“I think I shall go and read for a while before we are called to the evening meal.” Emmeline rose. “There are plenty of books if you should like to find something for yourself.”

“No, no,” Francesca said, waving away the idea. “I think I shall just write a letter to my family.”

Emmeline accepted the excuse readily. She was far away from her own home, so she understood the loneliness of it. She left Francesca and headed to the library. Jasmine was in the hallway dusting. “Jasmine, how lovely to see you.”

“And I you, Miss,” Jasmine said with a grin as she paused in her work. “Are you headed off to the library?”

Emmeline nodded. “Shall you join me?”

“I have work to do, but that is very kind, Miss.” Jasmine sighed.

Emmeline felt bad that the girl was dusting, but it *was* her job. “Can I help?”

Jasmine looked at her in surprise. “Oh no, Miss. His Lordship would fire me on the spot for putting his sister to work.”

“We do not have to tell him.” Emmeline clasped her hands together with a smile.

Jasmine shook her head. “I would not stand for it. You should not be doing my work, Miss.”

“Very well. But if you do get through before the evening meal, then you know where to find me.”

Emmeline was not surprised the maid would not allow her to help. Harcourt and his staff held very English standards for what ladies should and should not do. At home, Emmeline had the liberty to do as she pleased. But here she was expected to do things such as needlework or read.

Emmeline heard voices coming from the library. She peered in and saw her brother with Lord Torrington. She had no way to announce herself, so she rapped on the door gently.

The men turned. Harcourt waved for her to come in. “Did you need something, Emme?”

She shook her head. “I was coming to read.”

“Do not let us stop you,” Lord Torrington said graciously. “We were merely looking over maps.”

She joined them at the table. “For your trade routes?”

Harcourt sighed. “If you must know, yes.”

“I do not have to know. I merely asked, Harcourt.” Emmeline flipped her braid over her shoulder as she turned haughtily away, sinking into an overstuffed chair where she had left her book of philosophy the previous day.

Harcourt grunted. "There she goes getting angry over nothing. That will win you no dances."

"Then I shall not dance," Emmeline whispered spitefully.

Harcourt turned to Lord Torrington. "We can take these maps to the study." He gathered up the maps in his arms. "Shall you follow?"

"I shall be right along. Let me find that book I was telling you about earlier." Lord Torrington walked to the shelves, leaving Harcourt to nod his acceptance. Once Harcourt was out of the room, Lord Torrington turned his head toward her. "Are you out to make him accept the merchant's offer?"

"I am merely tired of the way he speaks to me." Emmeline raised her philosophy book to block out the sight of him.

Lord Torrington pushed down on her book with his finger, causing her to look up at him. "Have you thought more on what I said?"

Emmeline pressed her lips together. She had done little except think on the man's offer. "I have," she whispered. "I think it has promise. I do not see how we will discuss it further. There is little time."

"Take a walk tomorrow, down by the old oak that is due to be cut down," Lord Torrington whispered in conspiracy. "It is out of sight, and I can enter unseen from the other side of the garden."

Emmeline laughed. "That sounds rather scandalous."

"I cannot help that." Lord Torrington shrugged with a smile. "What we are attempting is just a little bit scandalous, is it not? I have a trusted servant who will keep secrets, but I fear your Francesca will not."

She laid her book in her lap with a sigh. "She has been after me most fiercely since she spotted us talking in the garden."

"That might help us with the illusion of it all in the long run." He straightened. "But I have to make haste, or your brother will be back. I shall be out by the oak mid-morning."

Emmeline could do little but blink before the man scooped up a book

and was gone. "What an odd duke you are," she whispered. She lifted her book and tried her best to put it all out of her mind.

Despite the fact that that Emmeline thought she might escape without too much interference from Francesca, the woman seemed determined to stay with Emmeline. "Francesca, I merely wish to have a day of solitude to gather my thoughts for the coming ball next week."

"You should not wind yourself up so by thinking of it." Francesca was pulling on her shawl as she followed Emmeline.

Emmeline stopped at the door to the stone patio. "Francesca, I do not require your assistance today. Honestly, I am as ready as I am going to be. You have been a marvellous help, but need some time by myself. I wrote to my lady's maid at home, and I have received a reply. I would like to read it in privacy."

"You should have said, My Lady. Of course you may have privacy. I hope all is well with your friend." Francesca, despite her words, did not look pleased. She did, however, turn and go back up the hallway.

Emmeline breathed a sigh of relief. It was early, far too early for the duke to be waiting. She stepped outside into the crisp air that had a hint of warmth behind it.

She found a stone bench and sat down. The letter had not been a ruse. She had been waiting for a reply to the letter she had sent Caeley enquiring after her health.

Emmeline tore open the letter with trembling hands. She took a breath and read:

Mistress, I am doing much better. The doctor has called on me every day as you instructed. He said the baby is causing me to be strained and I am supposed to rest. I do not know how he thinks I can do so with so much to do here, but I am trying my best.

I do hope that your season brings you happiness and perhaps a lord for our little castle. I know that you were not thrilled with the prospect of going to England. But if you can find a man as good as my Matthew, then I will be thrilled for you.

Emmeline smiled. Caeley rambled on much as she did in real life and

told of all the inhabitants of the castle. She felt as though she were back home with them for the moments she spent reading. When she finally reached the end of the letter, Emmeline wiped away a tear.

She smiled and folded the letter. Slipping it inside her dress's hidden pocket, Emmeline pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. She breathed in the cool air.

Caeley had such hope that Emmeline would find a strong, brave man to love her. But she did not understand society here. Emmeline barely understood it herself. The chances were that she would find only men who had no interest in her estate and only wished to have it for the money.

Tears pricked at her eyes again, and Emmeline stood up defiantly. She would not sit and cry as if a child. Despite how Francesca chided Emmeline sometimes for pouting, she had no interest in crying over something as ridiculous as a situation that did not yet exist.

With the duke's help perhaps she could find a true match. Her heart soared at the thought. If the false engagement could buy her time to find a man worthy of her love, then what was there to lose from it?

She began to walk through the garden. It was amazing how clear the sky was and yet how the wind blew. Emmeline had no doubt that clouds would blow in again. England seemed determined to keep clouds blanketed over them.

It took her a few minutes to reach the lawn that spread out before the line of trees at the side of the property. Harcourt said the trees were to buffer the wind so that games may be played on the lawn. But Emmeline felt it was probably more to buffer the neighbours.

She did not understand how Harcourt could like living so close to others. She was used to having miles between homes. Here everything was too closely pressed together.

The oak stood waiting for her. She looked up into the branches. It indeed had spots on the leaves, and the tree looked to be withering by the day. "No wonder Harcourt is having it cut down. Poor old Grandfather Oak," Emmeline whispered as she put her hand on the rough bark of the tree. "Bet you have seen a good many things in your years."

“If only we lived as long,” a voice said from behind the tree.

Emmeline jumped and put her hand over her heart. “You have given me a fright, spirit of the forest!”

“I apologise.” Lord Torrington’s head appeared around the oak. “I was unaware of who had approached until you spoke. I did not mean to scare you.”

She breathed in deeply and let it out slowly before she spoke again. “I thought you were not to be here until mid-morning. Surely it is not that late yet.”

“I found a moment to leave and took it. I did not see any merit in riding all over London just to waste away the morning.” He motioned for her to come into the trees. “Is anyone near?”

Emmeline clasped her hands together and turned about as if admiring the gardens. “No,” she whispered. “I told Francesca that I needed a day to myself to collect my thoughts. She was not happy, but she had no choice but to accept it.”

“Then let us speak so we do not look any more suspicious than is needed.” He disappeared around the tree as if he had never been there at all.

Emmeline had some misgivings about going into the trees with the duke, but she thought the risk was worth what she could potentially gain. With that in mind, she stepped gingerly around the tree, picking her footing carefully so that she did not trip. She found the duke leaning against the oak waiting patiently.

“So, this false engagement that you are proposing, how will it occur?” Emmeline tugged her shawl around her shoulders at the coolness of the shadows.

Lord Torrington shrugged. “I had hoped we could discuss it and come up with a way for our intentions to become apparent. Once we are a couple, we can tell your brother our intentions to become engaged. That way we can spend the season courting.”

“How will I find a match if I am being courted?” Emmeline folded her arms.

He chuckled. "Well, we will be at parties. We can arrange it so that we have time apart. It will give me time to conduct business, and you can find your perfect match."

"I can see where that would be helpful, but will it not look poorly upon you if I am off chatting with other gentlemen?"

"Talk to the women they know, get introduced. I am sure as a woman you can think of ways. Besides, the object is for you to find a match before we are formally engaged."

The wind shook the trees overhead, as if they wanted a say in the conversation too. Lord Torrington looked up. "It should be simple to get the match set aside. It happens all the time. As long as we break with each other before the official announcement, then you get all of the notice for being my betrothed, but none of the consequences."

"That is true," Emmeline whispered. "You are really quite clever."

He laughed, and his hair shook with his merriment. "You said that as if you are truly shocked. Certainly, I am offended, Lady Callum."

Emmeline covered her mouth as she laughed. She shook her head. "I meant no offense, Your Grace."

"Trust me, I believe you. You do not mince words when you wish to cause a grievance. I have heard you speak to your brother, remember?" His smile was warm and put Emmeline at ease.

"If you had to be engaged to someone it is better to see their ugly side first."

"Ugly? That is the most attractive side." His words were bantered back with practised ease, and Emmeline shook her head at him. "Now, I think we should start our courtship at the first ball."

She shrugged and agreed, "I am sure that we can come up with something. My brother would be a good choice for discovering us, but we can discuss it the night of the ball and figure it out."

"You really are nothing like your brother. He is not much for just going in unprepared, yet you seem very willing to do so." Lord Torrington watched her, and Emmeline wondered what his judgment of her was.

A bird cried overhead startling Emmeline. Lord Torrington snorted in laughter at her nervousness. "Devil sees you laughing, Your Grace. He knows my nervousness is from a place of good standing and your ease is from your propensity to skulk about in gardens." Emmeline's words only caused him to lose himself in mirth more. She became concerned that someone might actually hear him. "Shush," she said as she reached out to hit him on the shoulder. "You will bring the whole household here."

"Then we start our plan a week early," he said with no regard at all.

Emmeline narrowed her eyes at him. "I do not wish to be found in a garden with anyone, duke or not."

He shrugged. "Then stop making me laugh."

"I do not think you have any worries over marriage. No woman is going to put up with you. Bless your mother for trying," Emmeline shook her head and crossed her arms back over her chest.

Lord Torrington grinned. "You know the angrier you get, the more your accent comes through."

"Aye, well, at least I do not sound like a mule let out in the pasture," Emmeline retorted.

He shook his head. "I try to make a grand gesture for you, and you insult me?"

"Do you know how women work, Your Grace?" Emmeline sighed. "Perhaps while we are pretending to court you could learn a thing or two." She squinted at him. "Will your mother not just start up again as soon as you break off with me?"

Lord Torrington shook his finger at her and smiled. "There is the thing. I am going to be broken-hearted. You shall break my heart into tiny pieces. She may be glad to let me go on my soul-searching trip, which just happens to take me to the holdings that I want to check on."

"That is just wrong," Emmeline said, but she smiled despite herself. "I do hope that Harcourt will forgive me for breaking his friend's heart."

“Oh, do not fret, I will make sure that Harcourt knows that part is more for my mother’s sake. He knows how she is.” Lord Torrington stood up and stretched as if leaning against the tree had caused him a great deal of pain. “I do believe that we are settled, until we meet the night of the ball.”

Emmeline frowned. “I fear that I will not see my home for some time. I hope that this is all worth it.”

“Freedom is always worth it,” Lord Torrington said firmly. “Until the ball, Lady Callum.” He gave her a deep bow, and she curtseyed to him in return.

She watched the duke slip back through the trees, and she made her way back out under the sunlight. She looked up at Grandfather Oak. “You keep my secrets, Grandfather,” she whispered before turning back to the house.

To her surprise, Harcourt was waiting on her in the dining room. “You seem rather eager to speak. What is it, Harcourt?” Her brother looped his arm through hers and led her toward his study.

“I have had another letter about you.”

Emmeline felt panic rise in her as she was guided into the study. Harcourt seemed entirely too happy. She thought of the duke and their plans. They might be for nothing if Harcourt did not even let her get to the ball.

“Here.” He held the folded piece of paper out to her as he sat down in his chair.

Emmeline took the letter with misgivings.

“Oh, do not look so apprehensive, Sister. It is just a letter.”

She opened the letter, and it was as she feared a letter offering courtship. “I do not know this man. Is he important?” She put an emphasis on the word important.

Harcourt’s head tilted from side to side. “He is a baron. That is not a horrible choice.”

“A baron is below my station, Brother.” She tried to conjure up all the

indignation she could. "I will not stand for it."

Harcourt sighed. "It would make things simpler if you did. You already are a nervous jumble. What if you get to the ball and have a poor showing?"

"Did Francesca tell you that? I am not a jumble of anything. I am fine. Do I not look calm to you?" Emmeline tossed the letter onto his desk. "I know my own mind, Harcourt, and this man is not worthy of me. Do you think that Mother would want you to press me like this to accept a man below my worth?"

The mention of their mother softened Harcourt. Emmeline saw him relent. "You are right. He is not the best. You deserve more. I just worry for you, Emmeline."

"Then stop listening to Francesca so much. She is nervous because she wants a good showing for her own standing. I will do you both proud. But it would help if I were shown that you believe in me, Brother." Emmeline clasped her hands in her lap. "Why do you not?"

Harcourt shook his head. "I do believe in you, Sister. I just worry."

"I am not a child. I do not need your worry." Emmeline reached her hand out, and Harcourt grasped it in his own hand. "Please, promise that you will give me at least until the first ball."

He nodded with a sigh. "Of course," he whispered. "Of course, I will."

She stood up, and Harcourt released her hand. "I am going to read. Try to relax, Brother."

Emmeline left Harcourt with his letter. She did not know whether she should be angry at Francesca or tender at her worry. The woman had as much to lose reputation-wise as Emmeline did if she did not make a good showing. After all, Francesca was supposed to be an expert at such things.

"Hello, Miss," Jasmine's cheery voice greeted Emmeline as she entered the library.

A smile came to Emmeline's face as she saw the friendly maid dusting the books in the library. "Jasmine, I am so happy to see you."

“And I you, Miss,” Jasmine was perched up on the rolling ladder, dusting biographies.

Part of Emmeline wanted to tell Jasmine about everything. But she knew it would be better to keep it quiet. Instead, Emmeline said, “I heard from my lady’s maid today.”

Jasmine looked confused before saying, “Oh, the one you left in Scotland.”

“Yes. Caeley is her name.” Emmeline settled in her favourite chair. “She is doing much better.”

Jasmine nodded and came down to reach the books on the bottom shelf. “I remember you saying she was ill. What was it that she was ill from?”

“She is having a child, and the doctor thinks it is from the pregnancy.” Emmeline shrugged. “She seems to be in fine spirits, although not happy that the doctor has ordered her to rest.”

Jasmine stopped what she was doing and looked around at Emmeline. “Your lady’s maid is with child?”

“Oh, yes.” Emmeline nodded enthusiastically. “She is hoping for a little boy. Her husband is our gardener.”

Jasmine smiled and clasped her hands in front of her chest. “That is so sweet. I know of several women who lost their positions as lady’s maid due to getting married. It was too much of an inconvenience for their mistresses.”

“Nonsense,” Emmeline scoffed. “A child is never an inconvenience, and every woman has the right to marry if she so chooses.” Emmeline smiled and leaned over to whisper, “I just hope that I can find a man as good as Caeley’s Matthew. He is such a dear man, and he loves her so.”

Jasmine sighed happily and came to sit on the floor near Emmeline. “I hope I can find a husband one day who will love me like that too.”

“I am sure you will. I will make it my mission to see to it if I have to.”

The laughter from the maid brought a smile to Emmeline’s face. “You

are so oddly wonderful, Miss.”

“I take that as a compliment.” Emmeline picked up her book as Jasmine stood up. The maid patted her skirt to make sure it was straight then set back to her dusting.

They shared a companionable silence after that. Emmeline read her book and Jasmine dusted. When Jasmine finally finished the room, she paused to look at Emmeline. “May I bring you some tea, Miss?”

Emmeline frowned. “Oh. Is it that late already?”

“Yes, Miss.” Jasmine waited expectantly. Emmeline nodded her acceptance of the offer and Jasmine was quickly out of the room.

At the sound of footsteps, Emmeline looked up. She was sure it was not Jasmine, as the woman had scarcely had time to get down the hallway. She looked up as Gerald came to the door. “Yes?”

Gerald bowed. “Lady Grayson is here to see you, Miss.”

“Lady Grayson?” Emmeline did not know of any such person and thought it odd that one would call on her.

He nodded and whispered, “She is the wife of one of your brother’s business associates, Miss. Her husband is here to call on your brother.”

“Well, please send her in, Gerald.” Emmeline put her book away and straightened herself up.

Gerald was back a few moments later with a dark-haired woman in tow. “Lady Grayson, Miss.”

Emmeline stood up and smiled at the woman. “Please come in, Lady Grayson. This is a pleasure. I so rarely get to meet anyone outside of my household.”

Lady Grayson joined her and Emmeline accepted the brief hug that the woman offered. “Your brother has talked of you so much, but he failed to mention how lovely you are.”

“I fear that my brother has not told me much of you, but he rarely speaks of business. Will you sit with me?” Emmeline waved at the chair near the one she had been occupying.

Lady Grayson accepted the invitation with a dip of her head. "This is a spacious library."

"I rather like it here. I come here to read whenever I can."

Lady Grayson was a beautiful woman with long dark hair and a fair complexion. She looked as though she had stepped out of a storybook that had been brought to life. Beside her Emmeline felt quite clumsy and dull. But Emmeline felt like that a lot around the women of society.

"Your brother said you would need some introductions around society," Lady Grayson ventured.

Emmeline blushed at her brother having to put out the word for her, but when would she have had the time? "Truthfully he is correct. I am new here, and I could really use all the help I can get."

"Well, I am acquainted with several high-ranking ladies. We meet for tea at least twice a week. I am sure that they would all adore meeting you, and they might even have connections that may help along the way." Lady Grayson folded her hands gracefully over her knees.

Emmeline bit her lip. She was pondering what to say when Jasmine came back. The maid made a squeak of surprise. Emmeline waved her hand toward the maid. "This is Jasmine, Lady Grayson."

Lady Grayson inclined her head politely to the maid, who hurried to put the tea tray down. "Is that all you needed, Miss?" Jasmine bit her lip as she looked over at Emmeline's guest.

Emmeline looked over the tray to make sure that there was a spare cup. "That should suffice. Thank you, Jasmine."

The maid curtsied and quickly left the room. Lady Grayson covered her mouth as she laughed softly. "Forgive me, but we have a maid that acts just like that. The little thing squeaks and runs off at the least provocation."

"I think she is shy," Emmeline said as she poured the tea.

Lady Grayson took the cup that Emmeline offered her. "I meant no offense toward the child. She seems perfectly darling. I just have one

at home like that. I am hoping she calms down. She sends the dogs right into fits with all her jumping about.”

“You have dogs?” Emmeline looked at the woman with interest.

She nodded enthusiastically. “My husband hunts, but I have taken two of the hounds as my own. They stay with me most all the time, especially when my husband is away.”

“We have large sheep dogs at the castle and some smaller dogs for the rats. The little dogs love to scamper around my feet when I am out walking.” Emmeline smiled fondly at the memory.

Lady Grayson gave her a curious look. “You are from Scotland, is that right? Your brother never said. But now that I hear your accent, I think it is a thing of certainty.”

Emmeline giggled. “I really cannot hope to hide my ancestry around here.”

“I think it is a charming accent and one that may entice the young men. It gives you a little something different than all the other young ladies hoping to show themselves at the balls.” Lady Grayson lifted her teacup as if to toast Emmeline.

Emmeline lifted her cup back in salute to the woman. She took a sip with a smile. This season might not turn out so badly after all.

Chapter 6

The first ball of the season was held on the Fillory estate. Nash arrived just a touch late due to road conditions. One of the streets had flooded, which made the driver take a different route.

The sound of a violin and cello drifted softly out into the courtyard as Nash left the carriage. The footman bowed his head and swiftly picked up the step stool before hurrying back to his post at the back of the carriage. Nash gave a nod to the driver, Roger, and headed up the steps to the impressive home of Lord Fillory and his splendid wife.

“Your Grace,” the doorman said with a bow to Nash as he held the door open.

“How are you, Sterling?”

“I am most well, Your Grace. It pleases me that you should ask.” The doorman waved toward the anxiously waiting butler. “I trust your parents are well, Your Grace?”

Nash could not help the slight laugh at the man’s question. “They are quite well, Sterling. You have given no thought to returning to my mother’s employ?”

He shifted, and Nash gave him a reprieve by patting him on the shoulder. Nash understood how his mother could be, and he held the man in no fault for seeking other employment. “Carry on, Sterling. I hold no ill-will for your departure. I would depart myself if I could think of a way to do so.”

“Your Grace, you should not say such things.” Sterling shook his head, but Nash saw the touch of a smile on the man’s face and knew the comment had amused Sterling more than he had taken offense.

Nash headed towards the rather antsy looking butler. He held a parchment as if he were about to recite a great saga. Nash knew the routine. He stopped and waited expectantly as the butler, turned herald for the night, called out, “His Grace, The Duke of Torrington!”

Two servants held the double doors open, and Nash walked into the room beyond where eyes turned eagerly at the sound of his name.

Nash's gaze took in the young women and their chaperones, each calculating his worth and how a marriage would benefit them. He headed directly over to where he saw Harcourt lounging near a table with some other men.

"Harcourt, are you already abandoning your charge?" Nash asked the question lightly. His eyes swept over the men at the table who had turned to look at him. "Lord Fillory, good to see you. It is quite the ball that you have put on."

Harcourt pursed his lips but remained silent as Lord Fillory stood up to take the hand that Nash held out to him. "I had little to do with it other than providing funds. This is my wife's affair, I merely show up. Will you join our fair company, Your Grace?"

"I might be persuaded to," Nash said with an incline of his head toward the lord chief justice of appeal. "Is that Fannery McCoy that I spy cheating at the cards again?"

Fannery McCoy was the youngest son of the Baron of Grissom. He slapped the table. "Does not take a trickster to beat you, Your Grace!"

"You might have a point," Nash said with a grin as he took the hand that Fannery held out to him. "What are you doing released from the confines of school?"

"Father's decided that I would serve better here for the time being," Fannery said. "Harcourt was telling me that you were at this marriage business this year. I scarcely believed it."

Nash shook his head and took a seat. Harcourt leaned against the wall as he kept his eyes towards the dance floor, no doubt keeping an eye on his sister. "You will hardly find a bride at this table, Your Grace," Lord Fillory said with a smile as he picked up the cards he had left lying on the table.

It was hard to fight the urge to tell them that where he would not find a bride was right where he wished to be. He had to seem at least a little receptive to the idea for his and Lady Callum's plan to succeed. "That is true," Nash said. He rose and looked over at Harcourt. "Speak with me a moment, Harcourt?"

Harcourt looked over at Nash then back at the dance floor. "Of course," Harcourt agreed reluctantly.

Nash turned with a smile and headed toward a hallway out of sight of the ballroom. When he stopped and looked back at his friend, Harcourt looked decidedly not happy. "What is the matter?"

"I have a duty to look after my sister, Nash. What is it that we could not discuss from where we stood?" The very tension of the man seemed to radiate off him, and Nash wondered if his friend's veins would soon extrude from his head as they tended to do when Harcourt was vexed.

Nash shrugged. "I simply do not want McCoy reporting back that we are talking of merging fleets. His father is already more than entwined with your business, is he not?"

"He is eager to purchase some of my ships for his own enterprises, but I would hardly say he is entwined." Harcourt narrowed his eyes at Nash. "What are you about?"

Nash put his hands on Harcourt's shoulders. "About? I only wish to protect my interests and yours. I am sure it would not sit well if he knew we were going to join forces?"

"We have yet to even decide that," Harcourt reminded him.

With a wave of his hand, Nash dismissed Harcourt's words. "That hardly matters. You know that he will be infuriated if he even gets wind that we are considering it."

"That may very well be, but aggrieving Lord Grissom is not something I am opposed to, Nash." Harcourt straightened his coat collar. It was a gesture his friend often did when he was irritated.

Nash inclined his head. "Forgive me for being so foolish, my friend. This can wait. We should get back and get this ball over with. We can talk of this another time."

Harcourt eyed him in confusion. "I think perhaps your mother's constant meddling has affected your mind."

Nash laughed heartily and threw his arm around Harcourt's shoulders. "You might have arrived at the truth of the matter. Let us discuss my mental shortcomings on our next visit." He guided Harcourt back to the ballroom. "I shall relinquish you back to your chaperone duties,

Harcourt.”

With a shake of his head, Harcourt walked away to find his sister. Nash smiled and ducked back out into the hallway. He made his way toward the library as he slipped his hands into his coat pockets.

The music from the ballroom faded with every turn that Nash made towards the library. He paused for just a moment outside the door before he reached for the doorknob. The door came open with an easy swing of the hinges and revealed the silhouette of a lady framed against the light of an oil lamp.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Lady Callum,” Nash apologised, closing the library door behind him.

Lady Callum turned her head toward him. She was holding a book, which she put down on the table next to the oil lamp. The sound of her rustling skirts came to Nash as she stood up to greet him. “I would ask what held Your Grace, but I fear I do not wish to know.”

Nash laughed and shook his head. “You must think very little of what I get up to, Lady Callum. I was merely delayed by water over the road near the bakery on Stedman Street.”

“Be that as it may, my brother already had me out on the floor with one of the men who sent him letters.” She smoothed her dress down. Nash only then noticed that the woman had chosen to wear a dress made of a material that caught the light as if it were enchanted. “Is there something wrong with my attire?”

Nash met the woman’s eyes. “No. I just noticed the material. Is that silk?”

“Satin,” Lady Callum corrected. She ran her fingers lightly over the white overlay that covered the satin of the dark green dress.

Nash cleared his throat. “The colour suits you well.”

“I shall pass along your compliments to Francesca, as it was her choice of material.” Lady Callum took a deep breath. “Are we to really begin our alleged romantic entanglement by being found in such a way as this?”

He smiled. “Many couples stumble into courtships, Lady Callum. It is

something quite common, and I think it would seem less planned if we are discovered than if we approach your brother with an engagement.”

“It is true that Harcourt would probably be suspicious of such a plan. After all, he knows your feelings on marriage quite well.” Lady Callum seemed to resign herself once again to the plan. “How we shall be found is the question that you have not yet deemed to answer. After all, it is imperative that we both keep our reputations intact.”

He waved off her worries as he joined her next to the bookshelf. “I thought perhaps we could be caught in an intimate gesture. Faith, give me a moment to explain.” Nash smiled as he saw the set of her jaw. “Nothing so vile as to get us into the papers, I assure you.”

“What did you have in mind then?” Her gaze was wary. She clenched her hands in front of her like a shield.

Nash took a step toward her and held out his hand. “Your hand, My Lady?”

For a moment, he thought she might not consent, but slowly her hands unfurled from each other. She held out her hand to him. He took her long fingers gently in his hand. “I thought perhaps a simple kiss would suffice.”

“A kiss?” Her words were whispered and tinged with apprehension.

He held up his free hand to appease her. “Think me not some scoundrel, Lady Callum.” He lifted her hand in his. He leaned over to brush his lips against her fingers.

The door to the library came open in a flurry of outrage as Harcourt came in. He stopped as if dumbfounded and for a moment Nash forgot he was still holding onto Lady Callum’s hand. Letting go, Nash turned toward Harcourt fully. “Harcourt,” Nash said simply.

“So, this is what all that babbling about the Baron of Grissom was about?” Harcourt shook his head and closed his eyes as if he could not believe what he was seeing. “And you.” Harcourt turned toward Lady Callum when he opened his eyes again. “The maid said she saw you slip off as soon as I left the ballroom with Lord Torrington. This is looking very much like you two planned this.”

Nash raised his hands in surrender as he looked over at Lady Callum. She looked like she was very much interested in what he was going to say as well. He looked at his friend once again to find Harcourt waiting with his arms folded.

“Harcourt, we were foolish to think we could hide this from you. It is just that this all just came about, and we were overcome by it.” Nash gave Harcourt a pleading look. “You would be well within your rights to be angry with us both, but allow us a moment to explain.”

Lady Callum chimed in. “Harcourt, he speaks true. We were merely talking.”

Harcourt looked at his sister and shook his head. “I have eyes, Emmeline.” His eyes went back to Nash. “You wish to explain, then I would be interested in listening. However, this is not the place to do so.”

“I agree wholeheartedly.” Nash nodded his head along with Harcourt’s wise words. “I could come by your home tomorrow if that is acceptable?”

Lady Callum looked dissatisfied. Nash knew that she had been hoping for a quick conversation that would settle things. He really should explain to her how horribly redundant the world of society could be at times.

Harcourt cleared his throat and brought Nash’s eyes back to him. “We shall see you tomorrow. I trust you to keep this quiet until then.”

“Of course,” Nash said in a rush of breath. He would never betray a confidence let alone one that held his own interests. “It would be just as bad for me if this ended up in the papers prematurely.”

Harcourt put his hand on Lady Callum’s shoulder and waved for her to head towards the library door. He gave Nash one last confused look before following his sister.

Nash sat down on one of the tables and a smile spread over his face. In truth, Harcourt had caught them unawares, but it had all worked out.

The next day Lord Pentworth's household was buzzing with the news of what had happened. It was evident to Nash when he arrived that every member of staff must know what had transpired as their eyes followed him. Truly, Nash needed to talk to Harcourt about his penchant of speaking in front of the help as if they did not have eyes and ears. After all, that is how things ended up in those gossip papers.

The sound of his boots on the clean tiles of the floor reminded Nash to breathe. He had been through scandals before. Although, not usually involving ladies. Those were the scandals of rogues and scoundrels not businessmen like himself.

The butler hastened ahead of him to announce the duke's presence to his master. Nash had no desire to stop him from carrying out his duties and followed him trying to keep his gait relaxed. His voice rang out as he called, "Your Lordship, Lord Torrington is here to see you!"

"Well, let him in!" Harcourt's annoyed voice spoke of the mood his friend was in as the butler fumbled to hurriedly open the door.

It might have been Nash's imagination, but he could have sworn the butler gave him a look of commiseration as he bowed to allow Nash past. Nash frowned slightly and went into the study. Harcourt looked up at him from some papers he was looking over.

"Good morning," Nash said in a chipper tone.

Harcourt did not return the greeting. His hand motioned for Nash to sit down. Once Nash had done so, Harcourt cleared his throat and eyed Nash. "Emmeline is not speaking to me. I fail to see what I have done that is so wrong."

"Women are a mystery, Harcourt," Nash replied. "Perhaps she is just impatient for you to see what she sees."

Harcourt leaned back into his chair. "And what is it that she sees that I am missing?"

"Perhaps you are missing Lady Callum and me. You are the one who introduced us, Harcourt," Nash said with a shake of his head. "Is that really so unbelievable? Does not an introduction present itself as an invitation for two people to get better acquainted?"

Harcourt spluttered. "But, you hate marriage."

"I do not hate marriage. I merely dislike the ladies of society that my mother throws at me." Nash sighed heavily and folded his hands in his lap. "Did you not bring your sister here to marry? Is she not of suitable age for courtship?"

Nash watched his friend as the man's mind tried to wrap itself around the facts presented to him. At length Harcourt deflated. "You truly see my sister in that light?"

"She is a remarkable woman and not at all like those I am accustomed to. She has a good head on her shoulders and a mouth with which to speak her mind." Nash thought back to his first description of Harcourt's sister when they were discussing marriage prospects for the young lady. "She is, indeed, like a Greek goddess. She is tall and brave, much like Artemis."

Harcourt burst out laughing. "Oh, my dear friend. It does sound like you are smitten. I never thought to see this day, and to think it was my own sister that tied you up so." His hand hit the table in his merriment, thumping out a grand rhythm. "If you are true, then I see no reason to stand in your way."

"Have you not known me long enough to see if I am true or not?" The tiniest flare of guilt touched Nash as he spoke. He had never deceived Harcourt in anywhere close to a malicious way.

The smile Harcourt gave him deepened his guilt further. "Indeed, I should have trusted your intentions, but I am an older brother. I have a sacred duty to protect my sister from scoundrels."

"I guess our aims match then," Nash said as he pushed the guilt aside. He was doing this to help Harcourt's sister and that had to count for something. The fact that it also aided him was another matter altogether.

With another slap on the table, Harcourt announced happily, "My dearest friend and my beloved sister is a splendid match! When shall you announce your engagement?"

"We thought perhaps midway through the season," Nash explained. "Admittedly we had not got far into planning it, but we thought that would be best to keep up appearances for polite company."

Harcourt gave a nod of his head. "That is a clever idea. It would look better to have you two court for a bit, even if you have made up your minds." He laughed again this time shaking his finger at Nash. "Guess your mother will get her way after all, eh?"

"I suppose it was inevitable," Nash conceded with a gracious tip of his head. "The weight has been lifted from your shoulders."

Harcourt put a hand across his heart. "You will never truly know what a relief it is to have this all behind me. I guess the lord does answer some prayers."

"I have never been one to pray much, but I am glad that you have found some peace, my friend." Nash stood up. "Would it be improper if I called upon your sister before I left? I just want to confirm a few things with her."

Harcourt gave the matter thought then grinned. "I think that would be just fine." He stood up and walked over to a braided cord near the door, on which he gave a tug. A bell sounded far off, and they waited until a little maid popped her head around the door.

"You rang, Your Lordship?" The maid's eyes cut over to Nash and then back to her master.

Harcourt said gently, "Jasmine, where is Lady Callum?"

"She is in the library, Sir."

Harcourt snorted. "Of course she is. Would you please take the duke to see her?"

"Right away, Your Lordship." Jasmine gave Harcourt a curtsy and then turned to Nash. "This way, Your Grace." Nash watched the slip of a maid turn on her heel and hurry out of the room. He gave Harcourt a small wave of his hand before following. She was a jittery thing, that much was apparent to him. She hurried along the hallways, her eyes occasionally darting back to him as if she were unsure he were still there.

When she finally stopped outside the library door she bade him wait while she slipped inside to announce his presence and ensure that Her Ladyship was not caught unawares. Nash eyed the ornate moulding, which resembled a floral arrangement, with a frown. It was too much

for his taste.

Jasmine re-appeared and waved her slim hand at him. “She will see you now, Your Grace.” The young woman’s words were whispered as if it were some secret between them. As Nash stepped abreast of her, the maid added, “Her lady’s maid is with her, Your Grace.”

Nash thought from the way Jasmine said the words that there must be some sort of tiff between the two maids. He had never known the shy little maid of Harcourt’s to hold much in the way of grievances. He recalled the maid that Harcourt had brought in and he was not that fond of the idea of dealing with her either.

“Thank you,” Nash said to Jasmine, who curtseyed and then was off, like a deer released from a trap, down the hallway.

Inside the library Nash found Lady Callum and her maid waiting. They both turned their heads toward him at his approach. “Lady Callum, you look lovely this morning.”

Lady Callum eyed him curiously. “I take it that you have spoken with my brother.”

The fact that she ignored his greeting was not lost on him, but Nash merely smiled. “I have just come from his study, My Lady. He has given us his blessing, and I begged to come and see you before I set off for the day.”

Relief crossed Lady Callum’s face, and her shoulders relaxed. “Thank goodness for that.” She smiled and gave him a bashful look that was a bit out of character for her. “I had this dream last night that Harcourt was set against our match and we were doomed to our fates.”

“Never fear, we have triumphed, and he is quite pleased with the match, so I think we have nothing to worry over.” Nash returned her smile.

The maid leaned her head to the side as if studying Nash as she stood near her mistress. “I guess there will not be much need of my services this season as Lady Callum has already found her match.”

“You have been wonderful, Francesca,” Lady Callum assured the woman.

The dark-haired Frenchwoman dipped her head in acknowledgment. "I hope you still make use of all the wonderful dresses we have sewn."

"Oh, we shall be attending events," Lady Callum said with certainty. She looked at Nash. "Will we not, Your Grace?"

Nash agreed heartily, "We certainly will. After all, for propriety's sake, we need a period of courtship before we announced our official engagement."

"That would be proper," Lady Callum smiled. "When did you and Harcourt come up with for the engagement announcement?"

He chuckled. "I told Harcourt of our plan to announce our engagement midway through the season, and he was amicable to the idea."

"I am glad that Harcourt saw things our way." Lady Callum folded her hands in her lap. "I guess things really have worked out splendidly. I feel silly for harbouring doubts."

Nash gave her a grin. "Let that be a lesson to you, My Lady. Do not doubt me when I give my word."

Lady Callum's laughter rang out, and she covered her mouth with her hand. The maid shot her mistress a disapproving look, but Nash merely joined Lady Callum. "I should be getting about my business. After all, I have a merger to write up."

"Oh, is Harcourt finally swaying toward your idea for merging the two fleets?" Lady Callum genuinely seemed eager to hear, but her maid folded her arms crossly.

Nash responded before the maid could say anything. "Actually, he does seem to be. It is a good investment and one that is frankly long overdue."

Lady Callum shook her head. "You are writing up the documents before he actually agrees. That is a bit arrogant, is it not?"

"Not at all." Nash fingered the edge of his jacket and sighed. "He will come around. Harcourt is a smart man, if a little stubborn."

"That is like the pot calling the kettle black, Your Grace." The

expression on Lady Callum's face was sheer amusement, and Nash simply bowed in acknowledgment of the truth in her words.

Nash sighed. "I should take my leave before Harcourt comes to find me himself."

"Shall you call upon me again, Your Grace? Or send me a letter to let me know when we will see each other again?" Lady Callum had already picked the book up that she had been reading before Nash entered. Her eyes watched him as she waited for his answer.

He paused before he spoke. "I shall call upon you soon, but if business holds me hostage, then I will send a letter."

"That is fine. I look forward to seeing you again, Your Grace." Her eyes went down to her book.

The maid piped up, "Shall I walk you back to the front, Your Grace?"

Nash shook his head. "I can find my way out just fine." He added no name to the rebuttal for, although he had heard her Christian name used by both Harcourt and Lady Callum, he had no desire to build any sort of intimacy with the woman, real or perceived.

For all her grace and delicacy, the Frenchwoman faltered for a moment at the offhanded rebuke before dipping into a deep curtsy that showed far too much of her bosom to be a coincidence. "Forgive me, Your Grace. I meant no ill."

Nash looked at Lady Callum, who was eyeing him oddly. He did not want to upset the woman and their newly forged bond. "There is no need for forgiveness. I just do not need any help getting to the front door. It is not that far, and I would never pull you away from your duties to Her Ladyship."

"Of course, Your Grace," the maid said with a practised smile.

Nash inclined his head to the ladies before he made a hasty exit. Once outside the door, he breathed a sigh of relief. He had warned Harcourt about French maids, no matter their pedigree.

Francesca hurried along the hallway to the earl's study. He had sent

for her to come to him. She held her head high to remind the other maids that she was above their station. “Do go back over that table down the hallway,” Francesca scolded one jumpy maid she passed. “It looks as though it was not even dusted.”

“Yes, Miss!” The maid rushed off down the hallway to dust the table that Francesca had gestured toward.

A smile formed on Francesca’s face. She had grown fond of the deference that the other staff showed her as a lady’s maid. However, she had plans to move up a station. It was not unheard of for a nobleman to marry a lady’s maid, and she certainly had all the qualifications necessary.

She paused outside the door to smooth her curls. It had taken a long while to get them to lie just so against her skin. Having to make Lady Callum presentable had taken too much of her time. It really was a waste of Francesca’s skills to be used on the woman. Lady Callum, no matter Francesca’s skills, was still just an aberrant Scottish boar in a dress.

She tapped her knuckles against the wood of the study door. Once she heard the earl’s assent, she entered and offered him a demure smile. “You called for me, Your Lordship?” She emphasised his title as men often seemed to find that pleasing.

He looked up at her with barely a glance before he was looking back at the papers he held in front of him. “Yes,” he said absentmindedly. “What news have you of my sister? Is she happy with the match?”

“She seems very excited about the season, which she has not until now,” Francesca said truthfully.

The earl’s eyes lit up. “Really? Is she?”

“She certainly seems so, Your Lordship.” She moved across the room, hoping the gentle swishing of her skirts would bring his eyes to her. When he did look up, she gave him another smile. “Did you think she would not be excited to see her paramour?”

He chuckled. “Truthfully, it is just a bit hard for me to accept that something good has happened. It has been a rough few years.”

Francesca’s mouth dipped into a sympathetic frown as she eased

around the man's desk. "I am so sorry that you have had such misery in your life. But is it not time for you to seek your own happiness now that your sister's joy seems assured?"

The earl seemed to think on her words before he said, "It might. Speaking of which, how do you like our household?"

His words made Francesca's ears perk up, but she held the smile from her face. She put on a thoughtful display before she hesitantly replied, "It is a lovely household, if a bit out of step in its running."

"How so?" He leaned back in his chair, hazel eyes watching Francesca.

She leaned over his desk to idly tidy his papers, and to give him a good whiff of her perfume. "It could use a firm hand. Someone would say even a woman's touch. The staff needs leadership."

"Yes, I have faltered greatly in getting a proper housekeeper set up," he said with a frown. "I do not suppose that you would be willing to take on the position? It does come with certain benefits."

Francesca had to bite her tongue to keep herself from balking at the idea. Although housekeepers had a good amount of power, they did not do much travelling, and she enjoyed travelling too much to be cooped up in a manor presiding over meals for the rest of her days. "I think that my talents would be wasted in that position. Besides, is not a housekeeper generally hired by the lady of the house? Would it not be better to marry and give your wife the privilege of selecting her own staff?"

"You are right," he said with a sigh. "It might be a slight to any noblewoman that I brought here to find a housekeeper already entrenched. Your words are wise, and it is that wisdom that I hoped to help my sister along."

Francesca bowed her head at the compliment. "I fear that my wise words may not be needed for much longer with her impending engagement. Any lady's maid could fulfil the duties left."

"Are you thinking of leaving us?" The earl looked worried by that.

So, the man still had need of her. Francesca was pleased with that, and she could use it certainly. "It is simply that the duties that remain could be seen to by any maid, Your Lordship. My strengths lie in my

knowledge of society and fashion, and I would seek employment that would make use of them.”

“I shall have to speak with my sister, but would you be averse to staying on as a lady’s companion to Lady Callum?” He gave her a hopeful look.

Francesca hated to shoot down the offer out of hand, even if it was not her desired position. “It would bear some thinking on, Your Lordship. I do not know that I could cope with leaving England behind for Scotland.”

“I have no knowledge of how they might choose to arrange their household, but I am certain that considerations could be made for your comfort.” The earl was eager to assure her, it seemed, with the speed at which he responded. “You of all people should know how fragile engagements in society can be. Lady Callum is in need of you.”

She dipped her head in acceptance. “If she is willing to have me stay on in such capacity then I would certainly not turn away from it. I have grown fond of her over our time together. If I can aid her in some way, then I would like to do so.”

Her answer seemed to please him, and Francesca wished she were as pleased even as she put on a smiling face for him.

“Very good,” he said with a grin. “I shall speak to her at once.”

She excused herself saying simply, “Forgive me, Your Lordship, but I must go and check with the kitchen staff about Her Ladyship’s luncheon.”

“Of course, do not let me keep you from your duties.” He was already back perusing his paperwork before Francesca had even reached the door.

She kept her pleasant smile on her face until she was safely out of the earl’s sight. Then she frowned deeply. The men surrounding Lady Callum were sightless and senseless louts. Surely they could see Francesca. In comparison to Lady Callum, Francesca shined like a beacon of loveliness.

As much as she did not wish to wait upon her mistress any longer, Francesca knew that she had to keep up appearances. She could not

risk the noblewoman's ire, in case she turned down the advice from her brother. As dull-headed as he was to Francesca's beauty, the man was at least somewhat easily manipulated.

A lady's companion would be a good station to use as a stepping stone to finding her own match among the nobility. It would free her from having to do such minuscule tasks as serving lunches to the noblewoman, at least. She could put up with her companionship for the time being. After all, the woman was going to be rather busy with all the bustle of the season and her impending engagement.

Engagements were such fragile things at times, Francesca mused silently as she entered the kitchens. She smiled at the cook. "I have come to fetch Lady Callum's luncheon."

"I have it right here. Scarlet, girl, get to stirring that pot or it'll stick for sure!" The cook wiped her hands on her apron and waved toward a tray with what looked like bread, cheese and strawberries.

Francesca cringed as the woman bellowed again at the girl stirring the big cook pot. "Thank you," she managed to grind out before she scooped up the tray and headed out of the kitchen. She had no desire to stay in there any longer than necessary. Her early days had been in a kitchen, and she still held a grudge against the experience and all that reminded her of it.

She walked towards the conservatory where she had last seen her wayward charge. "Your Ladyship," Francesca called out as she entered a room filled with sunshine that flooded through the large windows.

"Over here," Lady Callum called.

Francesca followed her voice around a column to a hidden corner of the room that was warmed by a blanket of sunshine. "Something to eat, My Lady?"

"I am quite peckish actually. Thank you, Francesca." The woman gestured with her hand for Francesca to put the tray on a table near her. Francesca complied with a dip of her head. "Will you sit and join me?"

Francesca accepted the invitation gracefully. "I must admit that I am not hungry, My Lady, but I do thank you for the invitation." She sat in a chair across from Lady Callum.

The noblewoman tore into the bread and took a bite with such pleasure that Francesca felt slightly nauseated. The English were not known for being pleasant eaters, but Francesca felt that this particular offense was due to the woman's Scottish upbringing. She placed her hands daintily on her knees as she sat watching her devour the food.

"I must have been hungrier than I thought," Lady Callum said with a laugh as she saw the look on Francesca's face.

"So, I see. You should attempt to take smaller bites when in the company of men, or they might start to see you as competition."

Lady Callum replied, "I suppose that men like to know that they are going to get the lion's share of food."

"And everything else." Francesca waited but a moment before she said in a quiet voice, "His Lordship, your brother, said he was going to speak with you about a change in my status. I wanted to speak with you first and tell you that this was all his suggestion. I would never want you to think that I was trying to get ahead of myself."

Lady Callum picked up her teacup. "He actually came by here a few moments ago. He was brief but he did mention that he feared you might leave if we did not give you some reason to stay." She frowned, and Francesca wondered if the sadness on her face was genuine. "I do not wish you to lose your employment just because I have achieved my goal. I still need your guidance and, beyond that, I value your opinion. You are honest with your words, Francesca, as others are not."

Francesca dipped her head as if she did not deserve the honor of a compliment. "I was merely doing my duty, My Lady."

"Be that as it may, when my brother first told me of you I was apprehensive, but you truly helped me understand society and what my place in it was. We both know that I am just a clumsy oaf compared to you. Please, if you would stay on as my companion, I would see your status elevated all I can." Lady Callum's words held simple truth, as Francesca would expect from a simple woman.

With a smile, Francesca chided Lady Callum. "Do not speak of yourself so, My Lady. Speak of yourself as you would have others view you."

“See, such wise counsel,” Lady Callum said with a smile. “Please, stay and be my companion.”

Francesca sighed and fretted with her hands. “I fear that I might not be a good companion if your journey takes you outside of London. I have come to love it here, and it would tear me apart to have to leave it.”

“I understand,” Lady Callum said quickly. She reached across the table and offered Francesca a hand, which Francesca took warily. “I miss my home dearly. I could never visit such pain upon another. There can be arrangements made to ensure you are happy. Please say you will stay on, Francesca.”

Francesca laughed and smiled. “It appears I am left with little choice. You and your brother are formidable when it comes to persuasion. Of course, I shall stay.”

To her surprise, Francesca found herself enveloped in a hug from the young woman, hoping fervently that this would indeed lead her to what she sought rather than to folly.

Chapter 7

Being courted certainly had its advantages, Emmeline decided as she accepted the ginger tea a serving girl set before her on the table. Birds were singing in the gardens while she looked around at her companions. Francesca had come as well, and the woman seemed to be enjoying her new status as she sat nibbling on lemon cake and sipping tea.

The ladies, of which there were six, sat around a table placed on a raised platform in the middle of Lady Grayson's gardens. "I am so happy that the weather allowed us to luncheon outside in the fresh air. It is ever so good for the complexion and the health," said their hostess.

"I do not know if that is true," a young lady that Emmeline was only vaguely familiar with said. "I heard that the sun is dreadful for the skin and can dry you out like a piece of leather."

The older lady who was clearly serving as a guardian to the young lady who had spoken, chided, "Oh, Darla. You must stop believing everything that silly maid of yours says."

"If you are truly concerned for your face, you should try rinsing it in some rose water, perhaps?" It was Francesca who had offered the advice.

Darla's face lit up. "I have heard of a lotion that uses that. It was in the newspaper. Do you remember, Aunt Myrtle?"

"I recall the advert, yes," Aunt Myrtle said in exasperation. "She will be driving her mother crazy for that now. I am sure."

Francesca smiled. "I cannot say much of the lotion she speaks of, but I do know that rose water has some lovely qualities. I use it myself."

"And she has lovely skin. You really do, Miss Durant," Lady Grayson said, and the other ladies chimed in behind her, including Emmeline.

Emmeline looked at the other woman who was seated at the table. Lady Tillman was a brown-haired beauty and the quintessential English girl, if Emmeline had ever seen one. "Lady Tillman, did you

not say that you have a brother?"

"Why yes," Lady Tillman said with a smile. "Poor thing is not happy that he has to set foot out in the world, but Father is insistent that he shall get a bride soon."

Lady Grayson clicked her tongue. "Men worry over such things. At least if they fail to find a match they will not be destitute."

"It is unfair, is it not?" Emmeline picked up her teacup and took a sip. The ginger flavour was new for her, and it took some getting used to.

Lady Tillman nodded. "I shall have to agree there. What is a lady to do?"

"Countess Marson has done just fine without a husband," Darla chirped, before her aunt gave her a scolding look.

Lady Grayson flipped her hand and shrugged. "It does happen, but they are the exception and not the rule." She turned her gaze down the table to Lady Tillman. "You could always be a governess or a lady's companion?"

The look on Lady Tillman's face told Emmeline all she needed to know about how the woman felt about those options. "I do not feel that I am capable of governing anyone, let alone children."

"I have no great knowledge of children myself, but I have enjoyed my time as a companion to Lady Callum. It would be wise not to rule it out, even if it is not what you wish at the moment." Francesca gave the woman a gentle smile.

Lady Tillman sighed. "I shall think on it. Lord knows I have not found any eligible men this season yet."

"The season has only just begun," Lady Grayson reminded her.

The talk grew more of fashion, and Emmeline found herself losing interest. She had far fewer opinions on the fullness of skirts or the dip of necklines. Francesca seemed quite at home with the conversation, which took the pressure off Emmeline to come up with something witty to say.

After everyone had eaten, the ladies began to take their leave. Lady

Grayson stopped Emmeline and said quietly, "I was going to introduce you to some young gentlemen at the last ball, but I fear that I missed you somehow. Were you taken ill?"

Emmeline knew that the woman was referring to the ball where she and her brother had left hastily after Harcourt had discovered the duke and herself. Emmeline tried not to blush. "I felt a little faint. I fear my corset was too snug and we had to go to home cut it loose."

"Oh dear," Lady Grayson said with a frown. "I have had trouble with that myself. The thing becomes impossible to remove without a good measure of help. But hopefully, you will avoid that fate for the rest of the season."

Emmeline nodded. "I do believe I have learnt my lesson."

When they finally made their way out of the estate, Francesca whispered, "I had not realised that I had pulled your corset so tight."

"You had not," Emmeline assured the woman. "I merely had to have something to tell Lady Grayson. You are aware of why I left the ball so early, after all."

Francesca folded her hands together in front of her, but her face did not look pleased that her skills as a lady's maid had been called into question to provide an alibi for Emmeline's dalliance. The Frenchwoman's expression made Emmeline feel guilty, even though she had meant no harm with her little lie.

As they waited for the carriage to stop, Emmeline thought she should apologise. "Francesca, I am sorry if I caused you grief. I did not mean to."

"It is fine," Francesca said with a wave of her hand. "After all, I am not your lady's maid any longer, and so the reputation of the position should not be my concern."

After they had returned home, Emmeline went to the study. She was expecting her brother but had found not only him but also Lord Torrington. "Oh," she said in surprise as she stood in the doorway, wondering if she had interrupted something she should not have.

"Emmeline," Harcourt said happily. "Come in, dear sister. Nash and I were discussing an outing you might have interest in as well."

Emmeline's eyebrows rose. "An outing?" She stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

Lord Torrington stood as Emmeline took a seat beside him in one of the leather chairs. "We were just discussing that the next ball is set to be an outdoor one."

"That sounds lovely," Emmeline said as she sank down into her seat. Lord Torrington and her brother returned to their seats. "Yet you made it sound as if there was something wrong with it."

"Not at all. It will be a wonderful time for all," Lord Torrington responded, hastening to placate her.

Emmeline smiled at him then looked over at her brother. Harcourt chuckled and leaned up on his elbows upon the sturdy desk. "If I did not know better, Nash, I would think that you were nervous."

"Haste not to judgment, Dear Harcourt. Remember that you too will be on this chopping block soon enough." Lord Torrington leaned back in his chair, his gaze going from Harcourt to Emmeline.

She narrowed her eyes at her would-be-betrothed. "So, I am a horrible fate, am I?"

"Well, you are not for the faint of heart," Lord Torrington sparred back as he folded his arms across his chest, daring her to deny the claim.

Emmeline nodded. "That is true. Why, you may very well not make it to the altar in one piece."

"You two," Harcourt chided, but there was a smile on his lips. "I shall be there, as will Francesca."

"It really is not becoming to call her by her Christian name like that, Harcourt," Emmeline reminded him. "She is my companion now, not some slip of a maid that you can just call about as if they were a child."

Harcourt sighed. "Very well, Miss Durant will be accompanying you. Is that slightly better?"

"It will do," Emmeline said, giving her brother an exasperated eye roll.

Lord Torrington frowned. "That French maid is your companion now?"

"It only happened recently," Emmeline explained. "She was feeling a bit underappreciated in her current position, so we talked her into staying on as my companion for a while."

Lord Torrington nodded slowly, as though he really did not quite comprehend that. He drew in a breath. "Before I have to head back to business, I was wondering if I might steal you away for a stroll in the garden, Lady Callum?"

"I would be delighted, Your Grace. After dining with Lady Grayson, I feel as if I need to get up and move or I shall fall fast asleep." Emmeline rose followed by Lord Torrington and her brother.

Harcourt said, "Take Gerald to chaperone. I need to finish some work here and he is plenty capable."

Emmeline and Lord Torrington both nodded their acceptance of this as Harcourt rang the bell. The butler came in. "Your Lordship?"

"Accompany my sister and Lord Torrington out into the garden as a chaperone, would you?" Harcourt went back to sit at his desk as Gerald bobbed his head up and down.

Gerald opened the door for the two nobles to pass through.

"Thank you," Emmeline said to the butler.

To her surprise, she heard Lord Torrington strike up a conversation with him as they all walked towards the garden. Gerald was a man of few words to Emmeline, but apparently, he was not the same man to Lord Torrington. She was grateful that the men could not see her face for the split second she forgot to project a sweet smile instead of the annoyance she felt.

She had managed to control her face by the time they reached the garden. Gerald hurried ahead to open the door. She whispered, "Thank you." After all, her mother had taught her to be polite to everyone, even if they did not return the favour.

Lord Torrington stepped through the door behind her. “Gerald, would you mind?”

“Not at all, Your Grace.” Gerald dipped his head as if this was something the two of them had conspired about. Gerald fell back behind them a few paces as they walked down the steps and into the garden.

Lord Torrington walked alongside her and Emmeline noticed that, slowly, Gerald fell further behind until he was a considerable distance away. “Why is Gerald walking so far away?”

“To give us some privacy to discuss matters of the heart,” Lord Torrington said, casting a glance back at the butler.

Emmeline laughed softly. “I suppose as long as he can see us, it is within societal constraints.”

“Exactly. And it gives us a moment to discuss how exactly you will go about finding your match while maintaining a lady-like reputation.”

Emmeline leaned her head to the side. “It has been quite easy to ask after brothers or other male relations while having tea with the ladies. I already know a good number of young men by reputation now, and through their sisters.”

“I shall let you in on a secret.” Lord Torrington leaned his head toward her. “I am not overly fond of dancing. I would be happier, say, conducting business while you entertained yourself.”

Emmeline frowned. “Do you not have to dance with me for appearances?”

“The first dance,” Lord Torrington agreed with a nod. “I suppose I can be persuaded to dance once.”

Emmeline shook her head at him. “So we shall dance together and then you are free to talk business with the gentlemen while I dance and thereby get to know other eligible men at the ball. That sounds like it might just work, Your Grace.”

“I certainly hope so for your sake.” Lord Torrington shrugged. “You are the one who has the most to gain or lose out of this. I want to

ensure that you get what you want out of it, as any good business partner would.”

“You continue to surprise me.”

Emmeline felt quite odd when she arrived. Balls were held in towering halls, not in a large field. Though, all things considered, it was a lovely field. The first flowers were beginning to open. There were torches and candles that swayed in the gentle evening breeze.

“Bit early for an outdoor dance like this,” an older woman’s voice said, and Emmeline turned to see Darla and her Aunt Myrtle exiting their carriage. “Lady Callum, lovely to see you.”

“And you as well, Dowager Randall. Darla, you look lovely.” Emmeline smiled at the younger lady, who held herself a little straighter at the compliment.

“Lady Callum,” Francesca said as she appeared at her side. “I believe that your suitor has arrived.”

Emmeline fought the blush that came from the word suitor. She had never had such as that, and she could not bring herself to look at Darla and Dowager Randall as Francesca hurried her away. Ahead she noticed Harcourt waiting with Lord Torrington. She smiled at them both.

“Francesca and I spotted the duke as he arrived,” Harcourt announced as if this were some grand thing.

Emmeline shook her head at her brother and then turned a smile to the duke. “Lord Torrington, I am glad that your dislike of dancing did not keep you away.”

“You would be surprised what I can endure, Lady Callum, for the right motivation,” Lord Torrington said as he gave her a bow, his dark hair spilling forward over his shoulder.

To everyone else, it probably sounded very flirtatious, but Emmeline knew what the man was referring to and smiled. “Shall we go and dance, then?”

Harcourt laughed heartily at the look that came to Lord Torrington's face. Lord Torrington held out his arm and he led Emmeline to the dance floor. "I do think your brother might make me marry you out of spite."

Emmeline tried to hide her laughter behind her free hand. "Your Grace, perhaps you should not make his jesting quite so easy."

"Why did I not see the family resemblance until now?" Lord Torrington seemed to be asking the question to the stars above, which only caused Emmeline more merriment.

To her great surprise when they reached the dance floor, she discovered that Lord Torrington despite his hatred of dancing was an exceedingly good partner, when he was not making her laugh hard enough to forget the steps. Before she thought it possible, the dance was ending and Lord Torrington guided her off the floor and out of the way of the other dancers. He and Emmeline exchanged a bow and curtsy before he went off to talk to a group of gentlemen who welcomed him with a round of guffaws and celebration.

Emmeline drew herself up and lifted her handbag to look through it for her dance card. She had found the idea of allotted dance times a trivial thing, but she could already see others looking at their cards as the official dance got underway. The dancers cleared the floor at the call of the host, and everyone began the process of pairing up again.

Francesca joined Emmeline. "It looks as though you have some time before your next dance. Is that why your duke is over there?"

"Oh, Lord Torrington is not fond of dancing, so we came to a compromise. He dances with me for the first dance and then I can dance with others. I get to dance, and he gets to talk business."

Francesca gave Lord Torrington a surprised glance. Fortunately, the man was oblivious to them. "Lord Torrington is a brave man to allow his paramour to dance with others. Dancing is a delicate thing that brings people close together. It can sway hearts."

"I would not worry about that," Emmeline assured Francesca. Inside though, Emmeline hoped she was right. She had only until mid-season to sway some gentleman's heart to choosing her and she could use all the help she could get.

She enjoyed the music. It was easy enough to pass the time. She chatted with Lady Grayson, who introduced her to several of the young men who happened by as well as some of the young ladies that she was not already acquainted with.

Before she knew it, the time arrived for her next dance. “Lady Callum,” an older man said, causing her to look up.

“Lord Gorham.” Emmeline put a smile on her face. “If you are looking for Lady Grayson then you just missed her. She went to chat with the Hadrin sisters, I believe.”

He chuckled. “I was actually coming to ask for a dance – that is, if you have any room left on your card.”

Emmeline looked down at her card and shook her head. “I do believe I am free.” She allowed the man to escort her on to the dance floor. Lord Gorham was older than her brother and Lord Torrington by a number of years. Lady Grayson had indicated that he was influential, so she could stand a dance even if she was not attracted to him.

As they danced, Lord Gorham spoke. “I saw that you were dancing with Lord Torrington. I hope that you are not entangled with that one.”

“Oh?” Emmeline gave him a curious look.

Lord Gorham nodded. His face pinched in a way that was wholly unattractive. “Lord Torrington is a bit of a brute when it comes to his business practises. I can only imagine how he would take to his husbandly duties.”

Emmeline suddenly very much did not want to dance with him any longer. It was such a vile thing to say, even if it had come from a place of concern, and Emmeline was not sure that it had. “I am sorry. I feel I must sit down.” She pulled herself out of the man’s arms.

Lord Gorham followed her, concern etched on his face. “I should not have said that to such a delicate thing as you. I forget that women can be volatile.”

Emmeline waved off the man’s words, which were only making her like him less with every single syllable. “Lord Gorham, I hold no ill against you, so please do not take this the wrong way. I wish to be

alone.”

He seemed to take an eon to register what she had said. When he finally realised that she was dismissing him, he left with his face red and more than a little flummoxed, although he tried to save face by bowing to her. Emmeline watched him go with disgust.

She sank down into one of the padded chairs. Lord Torrington came over. “Are you quite well? Did that lout upset you?”

“Oh, he was just a horrible man. Mostly he just said things about you, but I could not stand to dance with someone who held such little regard for women. Honestly, is that what all Englishmen think of their women?” Emmeline shook her head in disbelief as she sat clutching her hands in her lap.

The duke dropped down into the seat beside her. “Where is your chaperone?”

“Harcourt is right there,” Emmeline waved her hand over to her brother, who stood with a drink talking with an older gentleman. “I do not know where Francesca got to.”

Lord Torrington chuckled. “She is probably trying to ensnare a husband. Speaking of which, do not take that blowhard Gorham to heart. He is not a representative of the whole of society. Try a younger lord.”

“I cannot just walk up to someone and ask him to dance, Lord Torrington,” Emmeline reminded him.

He smirked, which made him appear a good deal younger than his twenty-five years. “I do not think that will be a problem. Remember to save your dances for only the men you actually find interesting.”

Emmeline took a deep breath. “I shall try to remember that. I hope your trust in me is well-placed because I suddenly feel very out of my element, Your Grace.”

“I had better go before I scare off all your would-be suitors.” He stood and gave her a bow before returning to his cohorts.

Emmeline sat for a time before she got up and wandered off toward the refreshment table, where she ran into Francesca. It was nice to

have someone to stand with even if Francesca seemed a bit put out. As they stood there, a younger gentleman approached them.

“Lady Callum,” he said with a smile to Emmeline. “I was wondering if you had a spot free on your dance card?”

She gave him a smile. “I do, but I fear that we have not been formally introduced.”

“Oh, I am acquainted with Lord Torrington. Balls are for being social, and I thought it a fine time to come and see what had Lord Torrington captivated enough that he actually graced the dance floor.” He shook his head. “Forgive my rambling tongue. I am Edward Hawley, Earl of Granton.”

Emmeline curtsied to him. “It is good to meet you, Your Lordship.”

“And I you, Lady Callum. Now, about that dance,” he said with a boyish grin.

Emmeline fought to keep herself from smiling too much at the man’s forthright manner. He was straight to the point, but not rude. “I do believe I am free.”

Lord Hawley bowed his head to her. She accompanied him onto the floor where the dance was just beginning anew. “Do you dance often?”

“I grew up dancing at balls,” Emmeline said as they took their places. “I especially like the old country dances, but they seem to have fallen out of favour here.”

“There are still some balls that have them. I expect our master of ceremonies here to throw some toward the end. The Baron of Mallory loves his traditional dances, but there are those who do not know the steps.”

“I know the steps and would gladly participate, but we have not been assigned places, so I would assume that does not bode well for the chances of an event such as that happening.” Emmeline lifted her shoulders gently in the soft tinted muslin dress she had decided to wear due to the party being outside.

To her surprise, Lord Hawley chuckled. “That is right. Here I am

proven a fool. In one sentence you have shown that there will likely be no such dances tonight.”

“It is good to hope, Your Lordship,” Emmeline said quickly to reassure him.

He shrugged lightly, which caused him to wobble a little in the dance, but Emmeline did not mind. He seemed a very down to earth sort of man. When the dance finally ended he led her off of the floor.

“Can I offer you a refreshment?” Lord Hawley offered.

Emmeline nodded. “That would be lovely. Thank you.”

“It is customary for a gentleman to offer a young lady refreshment after exercising her so in a dance. Do not let Lord Torrington forget such things. He seems to always be in a hurry going somewhere.” Lord Hawley’s words were not meanspirited. Emmeline wondered if the man could even manage meanspirited, but decided she would rather not know.

As they walked to the refreshment table, she ventured, “You said you were acquainted with Lord Torrington?”

“Yes. I have had some minor business dealings with him. He seems a passing fair man from my experience, just very busy.” Lord Hawley retrieved a cup of the sweet drink they were serving and brought handed it to Emmeline.

“Again, thank you,” Emmeline said, taking a sip. She knew she was not supposed to hold up gentlemen who were probably in a hurry to get to their next dance partner, but Emmeline could not help but ask, “What is it that you do?”

Lord Hawley smiled and said proudly, “I dabble in a lot of things, but I met Lord Torrington through my shipping supply undertaking. We specifically make roping out of a variety of materials. We are also known for our canisters, which the tobacco traders favour.”

“Really?” She had never even thought about the implements that it took to get goods across the oceans safely. “Do the canisters keep the tobacco dry much better than other storage methods?”

“I say, yes. They provide a large amount of storage that is strong and

can not only keep things airtight but also survive being tossed about the hold of ships. The cylindrical shape is very strong.” Lord Hawley smiled and said with pleasure, “It is so rare to find a young lady interested in business matters.”

Emmeline internally scolded herself. Francesca was forever telling her to keep topics light and fun, show interest in but not knowledge of a man’s work. At least Lord Hawley did not seem to mind. Emmeline hid a small smile behind the fan that she kept at her wrist with a piece of ribbon.

Lord Hawley sighed with regret. “Alas, I have promised another dance to a young lady. I would love to dance with you again, but I fear that people might talk. I hope that I see you at the next ball, Lady Callum.”

“I look forward to seeing you again as well, Lord Hawley.” Emmeline gave him a curtsy before he turned and left to find his next dance partner.

The rest of the ball was a blur as she suddenly had more partners than she could dance with. Emmeline found she rather liked balls, but not always her partner. Several of the men were actively against Lord Torrington and probably only danced with her out of spite. Emmeline shook her head and wondered how anyone got so bitter.

By the time the dance ended, she was in fine spirits. Lord Torrington fell into step beside her as the ball ended and they left to wait for their carriages. “You looked like you were having quite the time, Lady Callum.”

“It was a splendid ball,” Emmeline replied with a smile. “How were your endeavours?”

Lord Torrington said thoughtfully, “I secured a new resupplying stop.”

“That is a good thing, is it not?” Emmeline watched him in amusement as he moved his head from side to side as if he were not quite sure if he agreed with her. “It cannot be a horrible thing.”

“Of course not, but then I do owe a very voracious lord a favour, and I do not like owing people.”

Emmeline could not help but giggle. She hid it as quickly as she could behind her fan. Still, several people turned their eyes towards her, and

Emmeline felt very much like hiding behind the tall lord beside her. Emmeline whispered, "At least you got some business done."

Harcourt forestalled any further conversation with his arrival. "There you are!"

"Surely we were not that hard to find," Lord Torrington retorted.

Her brother slapped his friend on the shoulder. "To tell the truth, I was trying to finish a conversation with Lord Hawley."

"Oh, I met Lord Hawley tonight. He seems a nice fellow," Emmeline chimed in.

Lord Torrington nodded. "He is as far as I remember from the touch of business I did with him. He tends to stay out of the papers at least."

"And that is something we all should aspire to," Harcourt said as if giving him a toast for his feat. "Will you come lunch with me tomorrow, Nash? I wish to discuss further the split of ships and such."

Lord Torrington agreed with a sigh. "It shall have to be in the morning, I have an appointment across London in the afternoon."

"Oh, that reminds me. I received an invitation for Emmeline and her escort to attend a small dinner party from Lady Grayson." Harcourt looked around as Francesca arrived behind them.

Lord Torrington looked vaguely displeased by that. "When is this dinner party?"

"Do not look so vexed. Surely spending an evening with my sister cannot be so bad." Harcourt was clearly joking, but Emmeline still folded her arms and eyed her brother with irritation.

With a chuckle, Lord Torrington agreed. "It is quite pleasant, but even with the pleasant company I need to know the dates and times."

"Oh, I know." Harcourt patted Lord Torrington on the shoulder.

Francesca whispered to Emmeline, "Did you enjoy yourself, Lady Callum?"

"It was splendid. Did you enjoy yourself? I lost track of you several

times, so you must have been quite busy yourself.”

Francesca smiled, but there was tightness to it. “It has been quite some time since I could participate in a formal ball. It was interesting.”

“We used to have dances in Scotland, but they were not nearly as formal as here. I do miss the old country dances, but I fear they might be out of fashion.” Emmeline shrugged.

Francesca shook her head. “We have similar dances in France. They are very entertaining, but the minuet and other dances have taken their place. Do you dance the minuet?”

“I was taught to dance it, but it has been so long that I fear I would not remember how it all goes,” Emmeline admitted.

Francesca frowned, but Emmeline did not think the expression was directed at her personally. “Everything seems to be about rank, just like the minuet. Even the group dances are all very strict.”

“It is much simpler now, or at least in the balls I have attended, which admittedly is not much.” Emmeline looked at her dance card, which she had scarcely had to use as she mostly just danced with the men as they asked.

Francesca drew in a breath. “Perhaps it seems simpler because of your status or the status of your beloved. Things often seem simpler from the top than the bottom.”

Emmeline grew quiet. Perhaps Francesca had a point, but she would get no further conversation to deny or prove her point as the carriage arrived. The footman put down the stool for them to step on to, but Emmeline let Francesca go on ahead of her.

Lord Torrington stepped up in the footman’s place to help Emmeline into the carriage. He gave her a curious look, but Emmeline smiled. There was no need to worry the man with her dimming mood.

Once she was in the carriage, Harcourt climbed up into the carriage and sat down on the seat opposite her and Francesca. He gave a nod to Lord Torrington before the door was closed. Emmeline looked out the window and lifted her hand to say farewell.

With the help of her generous allowance from Lord Pentworth, Francesca had outfitted herself with new dresses that were more appropriate to her station. She smoothed her hand along the satin material. Lady Callum might prefer muslin, but Francesca thought it foolish to overlook the shape-defining qualities of satin. She was looking herself over in the mirror when there was a knock at her door.

“Enter,” Francesca called.

The nervous little maid who had taken her place as Lady Callum’s maid for the season came into the room with a look of apprehension. “You rang, Miss?”

“Jasmine, yes. Would you bring my breakfast up if you have tended to Lady Callum.” Francesca was careful to put the amendment about Lady Callum into her request, as she would not want to be seen as usurping more than was her due. Not yet at any rate.

Jasmine bobbed down into a quick curtsy.

Francesca watched the young maid flee the room far swifter than she had entered. She turned her attention back to her reflection. As she no longer had to attend to the needs of Lady Callum, she had more time to attend to her own appearance. Francesca smiled at her reflection. The dark green dress brought out her fair complexion nicely.

She had a good deal she wished to accomplish today, but first of all, she knew that Lord Torrington would be visiting. He was a hard man to crack. Most men would at least allow their eyes to admire her, yet Lord Torrington seemed oblivious to her beauty. Perhaps the man was dull. That might explain his fascination with the simple Lady Callum. The woman’s stature alone was enough to make Francesca shudder. Lady Callum’s features were plain and unremarkable, set against the a regrettable complexion that made her look like the freckled and sun-warmed farmer’s daughter she behaved as.

It was only a matter of time before Lord Torrington truly saw Francesca. Perhaps then he would realise that any refinement he might have come to appreciate in Lady Callum was all due to Francesca’s skilled guidance. Why settle for an echo of refinement when one could have the real thing?

She barely noticed Jasmine scurry in and leave her breakfast tray. The maid did not bother her. She thought it insulting that Lady Callum had thought the girl a suitable replacement for her, but she tried not to dwell on such things.

After she had eaten, Francesca walked down to the lobby, where she hoped to catch Lord Torrington as he came to visit the earl. She sat down on one of the benches that were set against the wall. They were there for waiting guests, but Francesca did not wish to stand around for an undetermined amount of time.

The doorman gave her a curious look, but Francesca looked away. The help in a house such as this would be hounds for gossip, and Francesca thought perhaps that would work to her advantage. If she could get the doorman to witness an exchange between her and Lord Torrington, it might get back to Lady Callum and foster doubts in the young lady's head.

At the sound of a carriage, Francesca rose and made her way down the hallway to the earl's study. She waited for the duke to enter and greet the doorman before she started walking up the hallway toward the lobby. She met the duke as he turned down the hall.

"Oh, Lord Torrington, I had forgotten that you were due in this morning," Francesca lied with a smile. "That jacket is very flattering." She waved her hand at the line of the man's torso that hinted at the muscles that lay underneath.

Lord Torrington gave her a quizzical look. "Is Lady Callum about? I so rarely see you two separate."

"Oh, she is probably off reading," Francesca said with distaste. "She so likes her books." She reached out and brushed her finger brazenly against his sleeve. "Oh, forgive my forwardness. I merely was just interested in the material. It lies so wonderfully against you."

The duke moved his arm taking it away from her fingers. "I believe it is horsehair, but I shall have to ask my tailor to be certain. If you will excuse me, Miss Durant, I am expected." He stepped around her as he inclined his head toward her.

Francesca was not too upset that he had evaded her as she curtsied to the duke. He had at least spoken her name and thus cemented a little more of a relationship between them. She pondered how best to

use her position as companion and chaperone to the man's beloved to get into his good graces further.

She turned and left with a nod of her head toward the doorman, who was eyeing her with interest. She hoped the man was as talkative as he was watchful. But even if he was not prone to chatter, she had accomplished one more step toward ingratiating herself with the duke. Francesca could live with that, even if she felt the man must surely be daft for not falling at her feet.

The Earl of Pentworth was not much better, but at least the earl was easily led to go in whichever direction Francesca saw fit. He was so focused on getting his sister married off that he could not see a wonderfully suitable choice for a bride right in front of him. Still, there was always after the wedding.

Either way, Francesca saw plenty of opportunities waiting ahead to improve her station. She smiled and went in search of Lady Callum. After all, if she did not keep the woman company at least some of the time, then she might just lose her newfound position before she had a chance to accomplish anything of importance.

She entered the library and found Lady Callum with her nose firmly in a book of poetry. "Finally doing some suitable reading?"

"Oh, Francesca, you startled me so!" Lady Callum put her hand over her heart. "I am ashamed at how much I do like Lord Byron's poems. He talks in such a lovely way that I fear there is nothing, in reality, to compare to his words."

Francesca smiled and sat down. "Well, fantasy is not about reality, Lady Callum."

"Please, I have asked you to address me by my name. We are companions now, not mistress and servant," Lady Callum said with a softness that Francesca found slightly unnerving.

Francesca shook her head. "It is hard to break old habits. I shall try while we are in the privacy of your brother's home, but I feel it would be best to stick to formal names in public. After all, you are still my superior in rank."

"That all seems so futile and silly in comparison to all the evils that are afoot in the world these days. Do you hear much news from

France?”

Francesca cleared her throat. “I do not much like to think about the troubles at home. Fortunately, I have no family to speak of left there, but it saddens me to hear of it all the same.”

“I am sorry that I brought it up.” The woman truly did look distraught that she had caused Francesca grief.

With a sigh, Francesca reached out and patted Lady Callum’s arm. “You did not know how I felt about it. Your words came from a place of compassion. There is no need to dwell upon it.”

Chapter 8

Nash drew in a deep breath as he crossed the dining room. His mother wanted to arrange a dinner party to welcome Lady Callum into their family, but Nash had insisted that any such dinner should truly wait until their lines were joined. He knew very well that they had to meet to keep up appearances, and so he had arranged for his mother and father to attend dinner at Lady Grayson's home.

It would effectively kill two birds with one stone and keep his mother placated for the time being. At least his parents would not get too fond of Lady Callum only to be disheartened when the engagement fell through.

A maid squeaked in surprise at Nash's sudden appearance in the kitchen as he exited the dining room. "Forgive me," Nash mumbled to the young girl, who quickly dashed away. He shook his head and looked around.

Their old cook, Mrs. Jameson, looked at him with her mouth pressed into a firm line, which made her look entirely too much like those plump gargoyles that Nash's father had installed over the front gate. He tried desperately to put the picture out of his head before he brought the woman's wrath upon his head by laughing.

"Mrs. Jameson, I was wondering if I could trouble you for a lemon dessert. The hostess whose party we will be attending has a fondness for the flavour, and I wanted to give her something for her thoughtfulness." Nash hoped that by calling upon the woman's prowess as a baker that he would derail any scolding she had in mind.

It seemed to have worked when she clapped her hands together. "I say, haven't made much lemon in a while. I might fancy a good custard pie." She turned around and grabbed some bowls. She said over her shoulder, "Mind you, I would appreciate you leaving the kitchens without startling any of my other girls to death, Your Grace."

Nash laughed and left as quietly as he could. He liked the fact that the woman never treated him any differently than when he was a child. Titles and ranks meant little to her, and she kept him reminded of it.

He was halfway to his study when his father rounded the corner.

“Father,” Nash called out with a jolly smile. “Racing away from Mother finally? I can hide you.”

His father gave him a disapproving look. “Really, Nash, you should not talk of your mother so,” he said loudly. As he approached Nash, he leaned in. “Where is this hiding place?”

“I shall show you,” Nash said as he slapped his father on the arm. “Come on, old man.”

His father grumbled, “I shall show you an old man.”

They made their way out into the gardens. There was a stand of trees beyond the garden and across a small field. “There is safety.” Nash waved his hand toward the trees.

Inside the trees was a little opening where Nash, when he was younger, had taken a chair or two and he would bring blankets so that he could spend hours uninterrupted while he read or napped.

His father chuckled and sat down in one of the well-worn chairs. “I can see why your mother would not come this far out to look for you.”

“Think you might need a wagon to get home?” Nash asked the question in jest, but his father scowled at him and waved off his frivolity. “I shall leave you to your hiding. Unfortunately, I have to venture back into the fray. I have things to do before tonight’s dinner party.

“I still do not see why I have to go to that party.” His father sounded as eager as Nash was.

Nash gave him a sympathetic look. “Unfortunately, I do not think even hiding here will prevent that.” He turned and left his father to his thoughts.

Once he was back in his study, it took his mother exactly one minute to locate him. “Have you seen your father?”

“I do believe he went for a walk,” Nash said very helpfully. “While he is out, perhaps you would care to tell me if you shall be riding with myself to the party or will you and Father ride separately?”

His mother took a moment to consider the question. “I think we

should all ride together. Leaving early would be too much of a temptation for your father if he had his own carriage, and it would look poorly upon us." She straightened her bonnet and asked, "Will her family be in attendance as well?"

"I think you have met Lord Pentworth on plenty of occasions, Mother." Nash picked a paper up out of the bin for him to look through.

She frowned. "Has she no other family?"

"She might have distant relations, but none that have any sway when it comes to marriage. Her parents both died not so long back, and it is just her brother left." Saying the words aloud made the reality of Lady Callum's position clearer to Lord Torrington than perhaps it was before. He frowned at how lonely all it sounded.

His mother shook her head. "That poor girl," she whispered. "To lose one's mother before you can wed and bear children. She must be so lost and afraid of what is to come in her life with no one there to guide her."

"She seems to be coping well," Nash assured her.

After a moment, she nodded. "I shall go and see if I cannot find your father."

"Enjoy your walk," Nash said with a smile. After his mother had gone, he sighed. That would take care of her for a while. She would search the whole of the estate if she had to, and she might very well have to if his father chose to not come out of hiding.

He managed to catch up on his paperwork before he went upstairs to change.

Charles greeted him at the top of the stairs. "I saw your mother and father come in, Your Grace."

"I am grateful they made it back. I did not wish to go and round them up," Nash said with a nod.

Lady Grayson greeted them personally at the door. "Good evening,

Your Grace. Oh, Lydia, you look wonderful. Your Lordship, you look remarkably robust today. Have you been trying one of those new tonics?"

"No, I just walked half the estate today," Nash's father said with amusement.

Nash suppressed a grin as he gave the doorman a friendly nod. Inside he found their host. "Lord Grayson, how are you?"

"I am well. Would be better if I were playing cards," Lord Grayson said as he nudged Nash in the ribs.

"There will be no card-playing until after dinner. Then you men can retire if you wish," Lady Grayson called, as if to remind her husband of proper etiquette.

Lord Grayson sighed. "Well, you heard the lady of the house. Off we go to the dining room."

Nash and another man, who was waiting nearby, fell into step with Lord Grayson. He cleared his throat and Lord Grayson stopped abruptly. "Where are my manners? Lord Torrington, this is the Baron of Morton. Lord Victor, this is Lord Torrington."

"I say, a duke." Lord Victor looked over at Nash as if he were most impressed. "I did not expect such esteemed company tonight, no offense meant, Lord Grayson."

Lord Grayson grunted. "Offense very much is taken, Lord Victor. But do not fluff your shirt up too much about it. I have friends all through the social ranks, as you will learn."

"I have known Lord Grayson since I was but a pup," Nash said with a smile at the newcomer. "Are you newly moved to London?"

Lord Victor nodded. He fidgeted terribly with his lapel. "Newly titled, as well. All of this is a bit much."

"It will be old hat before long," Nash assured him. "Father, good of you to join us."

Nash's father reached the younger men and grasped Lord Grayson's hand. "Grayson, it is nice to see you. How is your brother doing?"

“Oh, you know Donald. He does not even have to try, and he stumbles into great luck. Come on to the dining room and I will tell you of all his adventures in Asia.”

More guests entering brought Nash's eyes back to the front door. Lady Callum and her brother had just arrived, and Nash made his way to them. As the brother and sister made their out into the lobby, Harcourt spotted Nash and raised his hand. “Lord Torrington!”

It sounded quite odd to hear him say his title and surname, but it was what was required when they were speaking outside of private exchanges. He grasped Harcourt's hand. “Lord Pentworth and Lady Callum.”

“Lord Torrington, I am glad that you made it.” She gave him a tiny smile.

Nash took a breath as his mother came over. “Lady Callum, this is my mother. Mother, this is Lady Callum, and her brother you already know.”

His mother extended her hand. “It is so good to finally meet you, Lady Callum. I look forward to welcoming you to our family.”

Lady Callum's face looked flustered for a moment before she dipped her head. “It is kind of you to welcome me. Thank you.”

Nash quickly got his mother's attention by saying, “Mother, where has Father got off to?”

“He is probably with Lord Grayson. I shall find him at once. He should be here to greet her as well. You would think he was never a nobleman who had learnt his manners.” His mother bid them all a polite farewell before she was off in pursuit of his father.

“I know my mother can be a bit much.”

“It is not that,” Lady Callum assured him. Harcourt gave his sister a look of concern. “Do not look at me like that Harcourt. I am not ill, I just need a drink of water.”

Harcourt nodded. “I shall go fetch you one then. I think you two shall be properly supervised here.”

After Harcourt had left, Nash asked, "What is the matter?"

"I did not know it would be this hard to lie to her," Lady Callum whispered. "It was one thing when she was just a name, but to hold up this fraud in front of her. Did you see her eyes? She really longs for me to me to be her daughter."

Nash felt no anger at her words. She might be wavering on their contract, but he could not fault her reasoning. "I understand. If you wish to break our agreement early..."

"No. I simply do not think I can face her again, at least until I have to."

Nash nodded. "I will do everything in my power to make sure that this is the only time before the engagement party that you have to see her." He took her hand gently and noticed it was trembling. "I promise you that I will try."

Lady Callum looked at him. Her hazel eyes searched for something on his face until she seemed satisfied, and she smiled. "Thank you."

"I am not saying it will be easy, but it can be done. At worst, there may be reports of my mother missing for a time before the party. Pay these reports no mind," Nash said with a wry grin.

Lady Callum hid a laugh as Harcourt came back. "Ah, I see that Nash has you back in better spirits. That is good. Your water." He handed her the cup of water.

Soon enough they were all being called to the dining room. Nash took his seat next to Lady Callum, and her brother sat on the other side of her. Lady Grayson directed servants around the large table.

"I am so happy to have you all here," Lady Grayson called out to them. "I do hope that I shall see some of these same faces for our annual picnic and dance later in the season."

There was a hearty round of agreement from the partygoers. Nash had been to a couple of the Graysons' parties for the season in the past, and they were always a nice time, even if he had not been looking for love. He nodded along with everyone else.

The conversation mostly stayed on light topics that were easily discussed while talking over the delicious food being served. Lady Grayson tapped her glass. "I also want to thank the household of Lord Torrington for sending along a lovely lemon custard. We shall be serving it along with our desserts tonight." She gave both Nash and his mother a nod of appreciation.

Lady Callum nudged him. "Took my advice about the lemon."

"Did I forget to say thank you?" Nash asked as he cut up a piece of lamb.

She leaned her head to the side. "It is nothing I cannot forgive. This is a very good lamb."

"It is."

Harcourt was talking to Lord Victor, who had been seated next to him as they were single men. Nash found he did not mind that at all. Lady Callum was fine company, and he enjoyed talking to her as they ate. He was laughing at one of her comments about the potato that he had tried to put into his mouth whole when he caught his mother's eye.

There was a twinkle in her eye that had not been there before, and a twinge of guilt filled Nash as well. Perhaps Lady Callum was not alone in her culpability of not thinking the agreement through. However, his mother would recover, and he would marry in a year or two.

The rest of the dinner palled over as he thought more about how he needed to make sure that his mother did not get too attached to Lady Callum. It would not do for her to overact to the broken agreement between them when they had never been officially engaged. These things just happened sometime.

He left the dinner party wondering if he should really take responsibility for his mother's rampant want of grandchildren. No one told the woman to get attached to a young lady that she had only met once. She knew as well as others that just an assumption of a marriage proposal was not the same as having one.

Yet he still felt a bit bad about it even after his mother badgered him for most of the ride home. He would make sure that at least Lady Callum would not have to deal with this part of their agreement as much as possible. After all, the young lady had hardly agreed to deal

with his family when she had gone along with his idea.

Emmeline twirled around in front of the mirror. "Jasmine, do you like this one?"

"They are all beautiful," Jasmine said as she looked at the dresses, clearly overwhelmed. "I do like the blue one on you though. It really makes your eyes sparkle and sets your hair off nicely."

"Then that is the one I shall wear."

"You trust me to choose a dress?" Jasmine put her hand on her forehead. "I am no fashionable lady."

She shrugged. "You know what looks good and what does not. Besides the blue one makes me happy. It reminds me of the sea back home."

"How is your Caeley?" Jasmine asked as she helped Emmeline into the dress, pulling the straps to tighten it up.

"I had another letter from home. They think she will have the baby before mid-summer." Her expression fell with her sadness. "I shall miss it being born."

"Fret not, there is plenty of time to get to know the babe," Jasmine assured her, giving the strap she was working on another tug.

Emmeline groaned, "Ouch!"

"Sorry." Jasmine grimaced, as she pulled the next strap, which caused Emmeline to laugh so hard she almost undid all the work Jasmine had already done. "Stop that," Jasmine complained, but Emmeline could see the smile on the girl's face.

Emmeline sucked in a breath of air to try and quiet her laughter. "I know that you are right about Caeley and her wee one. I just get so homesick at times."

"Surely you will see it again soon." Jasmine finished tying the dress up and then stepped back to make sure it was straight. "Can you breathe?"

Emmeline nodded. "I can breathe enough that I do not think I shall faint at any rate."

"Perhaps there will not be too much energetic dancing," Jasmine said with a hopeful look, causing Emmeline to laugh again.

"I do not know for certain if I will be allowed to return to Scotland."

"I do not think you would much put up with that." Jasmine put her hands on her hips. "You do not strike me as the kind of lady who takes that sort of talking to."

Emmeline grinned and whispered, "I probably would not put up with it much, but who knows what sort of man I will get."

Jasmine frowned as if confused. "Are you not wedding Lord Torrington?"

"Oh yes, of course," Emmeline stumbled. "What I meant was that you never really know a person until you are married. He might not want to travel or to have me in Scotland and him here."

The young maid shook her head and frowned. "It is a predicament, what with his business being mostly here in London."

"Precisely," Emmeline said. "Who knows when I shall see my home again."

Jasmine tapped Emmeline on the shoulder and handed her a shawl. "I think Lord Torrington will fall in love with you even more tonight. You look like magic."

"I do not know about magic, but I do like how you braided my hair," Emmeline said. "Better not keep them waiting." She gave Jasmine another smile and then hurried out through the door.

Downstairs she found Harcourt already waiting. "Francesca will be along shortly. I had a maid run and fetch her."

"I wager she will enjoy that," Emmeline said with a grin. "How do I look?"

"Like you have a dress on?"

“Brother, do you wish me to go out looking like a buffoon?”

“You look fine, beautiful, splendid. Mercy, Sister, you are only going to see Nash. You see him every other day,” Harcourt tugged on his coat as if Emmeline had somehow knocked it askew.

Francesca came down the stairs with a displeased look on her face. “I fully expected you to be in the carriage leaving the way that little maid carried on.”

“We are going to be late as it is,” Harcourt said without looking back at the woman. The doorman held the door open for them as they filed out.

The carriage was already waiting. The footman was standing ready next to the carriage door. He quickly and helped first Emmeline and then Francesca into the carriage.

Harcourt climbed in behind them. There was very little conversation on the way to the party. Emmeline found it quite uncomfortable. The other two seemed oblivious to it, and she began to wonder if the tension was merely inside her own head.

She was grateful when the carriage stopped. She was the first one up and therefore the first one out. Emmeline quickly and breathed in the cool night air. There was dampness in the air, but it did nothing to deter the revelry of the partygoers. She went up the steps toward the hall.

She had become accustomed to the people and felt comfortable enough walking away while her brother got himself out of the carriage. She stopped to talk to one of the unmarried girls who was waiting for her chaperone as well. Emmeline headed towards the music when a familiar voice stopped her.

“Lady Callum,” Lord Torrington, appearing at her elbow. “Where are your dutiful chaperones?”

Emmeline laughed. “We were separated. They were so cranky that I decided to just go on without them.”

“That is as good a reason as any I have heard,” Lord Torrington agreed. “Accompany me to the dance floor? I am certain they will catch up with us.”

Emmeline looped her arm through his. "Lead on, Your Grace."

"Hold on there," Harcourt called, coming up behind them. He nodded to a few ladies who gave him disapproving looks at his fast pace.

Lord Torrington turned at Harcourt's approach, turning Emmeline with him much to her amusement. "Ah, there you are. I found your lost lamb."

"I was wandering the bleak moors until His Grace saved me," Emmeline chimed in with a grin.

Harcourt shook his finger at her. "If you would not go rushing off without us then you would not be wandering anywhere."

"You have found me now, so we are going to dance. That is if that is to your liking, Brother?" Emmeline looked at him as she waited for his answer.

Harcourt sighed. "I do not suppose that it even matters. Go with you!"

Emmeline heard the music and its lively rhythm. "It sounds like a fun tune. I hope my dress is not too tight," she whispered to Lord Torrington, who gave her a look of disturbance. She laughed brightly not minding that it turned the heads of two ladies near the entrance.

"You shall get yourself in trouble yet," Lord Torrington warned her, but he had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes that told Emmeline he was not at all upset by her actions.

They soon found a place on the dance floor. Emmeline quickly found the rhythm of the dance as she and Lord Torrington hooked arms and twirled around, swapping arms as the dance went along. There was so much spinning that by the end of the dance, Emmeline found the whole world seemed to move. "I feel as though I have drunk a whole pitcher of mulled wine," she said breathlessly as they stepped off the dance floor.

Lord Torrington agreed. "It can be a bit dizzying."

They made their way to the refreshment table. "Is that Lord Grayson?" Emmeline gestured vaguely to avoid pointing.

Lord Torrington nodded. "It does appear so. I wager he already has a card game going somewhere."

"And you are eager to be off after it? Taken to gambling your money away?" Emmeline bit her lip at the look on the duke's face at her questions.

He nodded slowly. "Yes, I have decided to bankrupt myself." He shrugged. "I think running a shipping business is quite enough gambling for me. I do like the occasional friendly game though."

"My father never liked cards. He said men would waste away at them." Emmeline sighed and sipped her drink. "From what I have seen of Englishmen, they seem to take great pride in their cards."

Lord Torrington nodded. "I suppose they do. It is a sign of a cunning man to be able to better his opponents at the card table."

"I suppose you should be off to it then," Emmeline said with a sigh.

He gave her a bow. "Good luck to you as well," he whispered as he left.

Emmeline watched the duke for a moment then she turned her eyes towards a group of ladies that were standing nearby. Some of them she actually knew, so she could enter the group with no invitation. She walked up to them. "Hello, Dowager Randall. Where is your niece?"

Dowager Randall looked at Emmeline and smiled. "Lady Callum, please come and talk with us. My niece is currently on the dance floor with Lord Victor. He is a lovely young man."

"He has only danced with her twice now," another young lady chimed in with a sly grin.

Dowager Randall gave the younger woman a disapproving look. "Excuse Lady Heaton's enthusiasm, Lady Callum. She has not yet learned that some things are best left unsaid, even if true."

Lady Heaton looked as though she very much wanted to disappear. Emmeline gave the woman a warm smile. "I am still learning the ropes of society myself, so do not feel overwhelmed."

"You are very generous, Lady Callum," Lady Heaton said with a shy smile.

She stayed with the group until Lord Hawley approached her. "Lord Hawley," Emmeline said fondly. "Do you know my companions?"

"Yes, Lady Callum." He nodded to the ladies. "I do not wish to appear rude, but I was hoping I could steal you away for the tune that is starting. That is, if you do not have another partner."

Emmeline readily accepted by placing her hand on the arm he held out. "That would be wonderful."

As soon as they made it to the dance floor, Lord Hawley whispered, "Forgive the swift exit, but Dowager Randall frightens me a little."

"And with due right, she is a formidable woman." Emmeline gave him a smile as they stepped off into the dance. "I had wondered if I would see you."

Lord Hawley seemed to be dancing well, but it was a slower dance, which helped with being able to talk. "I did say that I would see you again."

"That is true." Emmeline dipped her head in acknowledgment. "Why is it that you have sought me out again?"

Lord Hawley looked a little uncomfortable for a moment before he smiled. "You are so straightforward with your speech it takes some getting used to. But I like it." They spun around in the dance. "I sought you out again because I enjoy your company and, if I must be at these things, I might as well enjoy who I spend time with."

"That is a fair answer. You said you ran a shipping supply business?"

He nodded and looked rather pleased that she had remembered that much about him. "That is right. You have a good memory. What about you? What are your interests?"

Several things sprang to mind, such as philosophy and history. But he wanted something dainty. Emmeline could think of scarce little that she had done that would be considered ladylike. She hesitated before she said, "I occasionally sew, nothing too intricate, but I can do some."

“That is a handy thing to have. It would be quite useful if you needed something mended right away,” Lord Hawley said with a thoughtful expression. “Come now, tell me of the things that you thought but did not say. Surely a woman such as you has something other than sewing in her repertoire. I already know that you are an excellent dancer, for one.”

Emmeline could feel the colour rising to her cheeks and cared not to think about how unladylike she looked at the moment. “I do have a fondness for philosophy and literature. I also helped raised sheep as a lass, so if you ever need help with sheep, I can come in handy there too.”

Lord Hawley’s face lit up with surprise as he as he shook his head. “You do not cease to astound me.”

“With the scant time that we have spent in each other’s company, I do not see that as much of a feat, Lord Hawley.”

The creases in his cheeks dimpled as he smiled. “Maybe it is not, but I still feel as if it is something to be treasured. I know that Lord Torrington has your heart, but if I can only be relegated to your friendship, then I think that enough.”

“You flatter me,” Emmeline said honestly. She was so unused to a man speaking to her with anything other than jest that Emmeline did not know quite how to respond. She flustered and looked away.

Lord Hawley’s voice came to her as she kept her gaze away. “I apologise if my earnestness embarrassed you. I did not intend that, I assure you, Lady Callum.”

She finally dared to look around at him and found nothing to worry about in his expression. He looked at her with concern, but not intent. “I appreciate your honesty, Lord Hawley. More than you know. I find that honesty seems to be sometimes lacking in these gilded halls.”

“Truth does stand out,” Lord Hawley agreed. “You are a rare woman, Lady Callum. Lord Torrington is a lucky man.”

She had met up with Lord Hawley at the following dance as well. He

was funny and kind. He held no particular grudge against Lord Torrington, and that was a good thing.

More and more she felt awful spending time with him, because she knew that she was not being entirely truthful with him. Every time he told her that it was her honesty that had made her stand out, she ached with the guilt a little more.

Worst of all was that even as she grew fond of him and he became her true friend, she did not know if her feelings went deeper. While she liked him the best of the men she had met, she still danced with others when the opportunity arose. She plagued herself with worries over whether she only liked him because he seemed safe.

“You seem miles away today,” Lord Torrington observed as he picked the carrots out of his stew.

Emmeline looked at him and then at her brother, who was skipping directly ahead to his berries and cream. “You really should eat the carrots.”

“He is eating his dessert,” Lord Torrington said pointedly as he waved his fork toward Emmeline’s brother. “Scold him.”

Harcourt said, “I am master of this house. I can eat dessert when I wish.”

“You do not eat Cook’s stew. She will still smack you with her spoon,” Emmeline warned as she picked up a large carrot and bit into it.

Lord Torrington scowled at her as Emmeline’s eyes went back to him. He deliberately moved a carrot to the side while she watched him and she could not prevent the laugh. “Do not do that,” Emmeline said, coughing when the carrot threatened to go the wrong way down her throat.

“That is why you should not eat carrots,” Lord Torrington said, as though he had made some grand victorious point.

Emmeline took a sip of her wine and narrowed her eyes at him, but he simply smiled at her in return. Harcourt snorted but otherwise did not intervene. “Say, where is Miss Durant?”

“You only noticed then that she is not here? What a grand host you

are,” Emmeline retorted. “She said she was taking her meal in her room. She has been a bit testy as of late. I assume it is from the pace that we have had to keep.”

Harcourt sighed and patted the table. “Well, I hope she rests, because the season will only get busier from here. I do not suppose I can talk you two into announcing your engagement earlier?”

“We agreed on a date, Harcourt. You can survive a few more balls,” Lord Torrington said with a sigh. “You should be happy to go to them. Why do you not look for a wife for yourself while you are there?”

Harcourt shook his head at his friend. “I have to chaperone, and that is my duty.”

“Will you promise us that you will marry next year? You are miserable.” Lord Torrington laid his hand palm up on the table as if pleading for Harcourt to consider his words.

Emmeline grinned. “He actually, despite his horrible delivery, has a point. Harcourt, you are so tightly strung that you might just snap if you are pulled any tauter.”

“I just want everything to work out properly.” Harcourt stabbed a berry. “Is that so much to ask?”

Emmeline picked up her wine glass. She eyed her brother over the top of the glass. “Things are going to work out how they work out. If you are looking for my permission to be happy, then by all means, do so. I am fine. Do I not look fine?”

Lord Torrington turned to look at her. “I am not a doctor, but you look alive to me.”

“Thank you,” Emmeline intoned blandly to the duke, which only caused him to grin. “Despite what His Grace said, I am fine, Harcourt. Look, just try to relax. Can you just do that for me?” Emmeline gave him a pleading look that had always worked when he was younger.

Apparently, the look worked on the older version of Harcourt as well. He sighed heavily. “I shall try, dear sister. I shall try.”

“That is all I ask.” Emmeline took a sip of her wine and rolled her eyes at Lord Torrington’s pile of discarded carrots. There were some battles

she had to realise she could not win.

Chapter 9

Francesca had tried on several occasions to engage Lord Torrington at balls or dinners. No matter what tactic she used on him, he remained aloof and distant with her. His use of her name had not given her the added familiarity she had hoped it would.

Unlike Francesca, Lady Callum seemed to be enjoying the season. To Francesca's bewilderment, the young noblewoman never lacked for a dance partner. All that Francesca had managed during the weeks since the outdoor ball was to get some invitations into social parties held by fashionable hostesses. Normally, that would thrill her, but her aim was a husband to solidify her place not more pampered women to impress.

One thing became abundantly clear to Francesca as she watched Lady Callum at the balls as the season progressed. The young lady seemed to be developing a friendship for the young Earl of Granton. It was not unheard of for friendships to be struck, but it seemed suspicious given the amount of time the noblewoman spent with the earl and not her intended.

There were already rumours here and there that perhaps the earl was interested in asking for Lady Callum's hand. Francesca was curious as to the man's intent as well. She had even gone so far as to approach him as Lady Callum's chaperone. But while the man was cordial, he did not betray any confidences.

Francesca would have been more forgiving under other circumstances, but since Lord Pentworth and Lord Torrington had been unresponsive to her, she felt it wise to come to their aid with this information. If she could break the news to Lord Torrington, then he might truly look upon her as someone worthy of his trust. She straightened her shawl and pulled on her gloves as she plotted her next move.

She had pondered paying him a visit. However, she did not want to appear that forward. Instead she had had to wait for him to pay Lady Callum or the earl a visit. As he was a frequent guest of the Pentworth household, she did not have to wait long once she made up her mind to talk with him.

Francesca waited just out of sight behind a sitting room door. The

sitting room had belonged to the lady of the house, but it was rarely used these days as Lady Callum preferred the library or conservatory to receive guests. Francesca strained her ears as she waited to hear the duke's footsteps.

As she heard him, Francesca opened the door wider. "Your Grace," she whispered urgently as the man came into sight. "I hate to disrupt your visit, but I need to speak with you on a matter of importance."

Lord Torrington tugged on his jacket as if something about its fit displeased him. "What is it that bothers you so that you have to halt me?"

"May we talk privately?" Francesca knew it was forward of her to ask, but she took the chance. She was not disappointed when he shook his head. After all, it had only been a slim chance that he would agree to something to brazenly roguish.

He eyed her curiously. "What is it that you need?"

"It is not what I need, but something that you should know, Your Grace." Francesca made a show of lowering her head as if it pained her to say the words. "I have seen Lady Callum pay much attention to Lord Hawley as of late. I worry that she may be harbouring a fascination with him and he with her, Your Grace."

If Lord Torrington was surprised by her words, he did not show it. "So, this is what you have to tell me? The same rumour that is going around every parlour?"

"I did not know that you had heard, Your Grace." Francesca frowned. "I just thought that you should know. It did not seem fair to you."

He drew in a deep breath. "Thank you for your concern, but I am capable of seeing things with my own eyes. If you would please keep that in mind in the future, it will save you useless worry on my behalf, Miss Durant."

Before Francesca could say aught else, the duke was gone, and she was left to look at the man's retreating back. "What an odd man," Francesca whispered.

Despite that he had heard the rumours himself, Nash left the grating Frenchwoman with a twitch in his eye from her words. He knew of the talk, and he knew it was not without founding. After all, Lady Callum had confided in him that she thought perhaps Edward might be a worthy partner for herself.

So why did it irritate him so that Miss Durant had sought him out, yet again? Perhaps that was the whole thing. The woman was persistent and dogged in her pursuit of him. He thought it harmless enough and refused to bring it up with Lady Callum.

After all, many women flirted almost as second nature. The French were known for their notorious love lives, perhaps it was just a difference of culture. The season and his false engagement to Lady Callum would be at a close soon enough that there was no need to bring any more drama into the situation.

He came into the study unannounced, which barely registered a response from Harcourt as he had done it so often. "Are you still pouring over papers? You shall lose your eyesight, but then that might help you find a bride."

Harcourt looked up at him with such a look of confusion that Nash could not help but laugh. His ill-mood was forgotten as he enjoyed the look of exasperation.

"What are you on about?"

Nash sank into his customary seat and sighed heavily. "My dear Harcourt, my schooling brother, if you cannot see the ladies then it will make them far more attractive. I assure you of this since I have seen the flock you must pluck your bird from."

"You are in a fine mood, are you?" Harcourt said, closing his register and looking at his friend. "Is that a new coat?"

Nash looked down at himself. "It is. Charles picked it up for me as I had neglected to do so."

"I think you should pay Charles more." Harcourt tugged at his cravat. "I should really have Charles come and show my man how to tie one of these. I think that my fellow used to work at the gallows."

Nash guffawed at the look on Harcourt's face more than his words. "I

always loosen mine as soon as I am out of Charles' sight. I think he knows and just pretends not to."

"Are you going to see my sister before you leave?" Harcourt asked with a smile. "I think Gerald is waiting on standby just in case. I do think he has grown fond of my sister."

Nash raised his hands helplessly. "Who would not grow fond of her? She is a woman of very singular quality. I do not know any who are quite like her."

"See, despite the rumours I knew that you had not given up." Harcourt leaned back with a deep satisfaction on his face.

With a sigh, Nash folded his arms across his chest. "Tell me that you too have not become a gossip?"

"It is hard not to overhear things, Nash." There was a shrug of Harcourt's shoulders before he continued, "And while you two seem smitten enough when you are together, you do tend to wander off at balls."

Nash scowled at his friend. "Lady Callum and I have an arrangement that allows her to do what she enjoys and allows me to also do what I enjoy."

"And that is a wonderful model for marriage if I ever saw one, but people just like to talk, Nash." Harcourt raised his hand in surrender at the look on Nash's face. "Fine, we shall not talk about it any longer."

"I am indebted in you if you can actually accomplish that," Nash snapped back.

Harcourt snorted in laughter. "Oh come now. You just told me to go blind. Yet, you are going to be grumpy because you are happy and people like to talk."

Nash stood up. "I think I shall call on your sister and pray that she has not given into vaporous rumours."

Even as he laughed at Nash's words, Harcourt rang the bell. When Gerald appeared, he instructed him to take the duke to find Lady Callum. Nash rolled his eyes at his merry friend and the smile on his

face.

The search for Lady Callum led them to the gardens where the lady sat watching birds flit to and fro through the vines hung with the fruit. "Good morning," Nash called before Gerald even had a chance to introduce him. Out of respect, Gerald fell back and walked a bit away to give them space, while keeping them within his line of sight.

Lady Callum tipped her head so that she could see him from beneath her wide-brimmed hat. She squinted up at him from her vantage point on the bench. "Hello there, Lord Torrington. Have you come to watch the birds?"

"I came to find you, so if you are watching birds, then I suppose I am watching birds," Lord Torrington said as he dropped gracefully onto the bench.

Lady Callum's golden strands fell here and there around her neck and face. He wondered suddenly what she would look like with her hair completely down. She looked at him curiously. "Why do you look at me so? Is there something on my face?"

He chuckled. He clasped his hands in his lap and shook his head. "No. There is nothing on your face. Tell me about your childhood."

"Why?" It was a simple question, but she seemed truly surprised that he wanted to know.

Nash sighed. "We are supposed to be engaged soon. Should we not know things of each other?"

"My childhood was probably rather dull compared to yours." She shrugged in the soft white muslin dress she wore. "There really is not much to tell."

Nash said instead, "You have quite the rumours going about yourself and Lord Hawley."

"Yes, Harcourt spoke to me about it. People talk, Lord Torrington." She looked down at her hands. "And in a few weeks our engagement will be no more."

Lord Torrington nodded. "I know. Which is why I am very concerned that your reputation remains unsullied. My reputation can take the

punishment, but a lady's reputation is a delicate thing."

"Do you think I do not know that?" Lady Callum sighed heavily, and her shoulders slumped. "I told you that I thought I liked him very much."

He nodded as there was little else he could do. "What about *him* though? Does he not care that there are rumours?"

"I have not spoken to him of it." Lady Callum shifted on the bench beside him. She turned her body so that she could look at him more fully. "What should I do?"

Lord Torrington could think of precious little. He was not a masterful player of the social game that everyone else seemed so fond of. "I think we should hope for the best, but perhaps we should spend more of our time together. It might offset the rumours."

"We could do that," Lady Callum agreed readily. "I shall see you tonight then?"

He stood up and gave her a bow. "Tonight." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. He gave her a wink, which was a bit roguish, but she laughed off the gesture.

It was not until he got back home to his own study that he realised that the engagement party really was not that far off. The moment he had been holding out for would be upon him. The odd thing about that was that he did not feel a sense of relief.

He sank down into his leather chair and stared at the ceiling as if it would tell him some great secret. A knock at his door brought him out of his revelry. Before he could say anything, the door opened and his mother entered with a swish of skirts and perfume.

"You are supposed to wait to be asked to enter," Nash said. He did not bother sitting up. He continued to look at the ceiling.

"What are you moping about for?" His mother's words were clipped. "Do you not announce your engagement soon?"

Nash sat up reluctantly under her scrutiny. He closed his eyes, as he had seen his father do so many times before. It was not until he was older that he understood why Father took a moment before he

answered Mother's questions. When he opened his eyes, he placed a smile on his face. "Of course, I am happy, Mother. I am merely tired."

"Who can blame you on that? Not I," she said in an unusually warm tone, and then immediately added, "I told you to rest more, yet you do not. I can do no more for you than I have done."

Nash rubbed his eye as he felt it start to twitch. "How is Father? I have not seen him in a few days."

"Did I not tell you that he went to visit your brother?" His mother eyed him as if she could not have possibly made a mistake, and she waited for Nash to confirm that it was his mistake and not hers.

Nash thought for a moment then said, "Of course. I have just been so busy that I forgot." Even though she had indeed, probably deliberately, not told him of his father's departure, there was little Nash could do but agree. "Remind me, Mother. When is he due to return?"

"In two days," she supplied smoothly as she adjusted her shawl. "Do you think your schedule will permit your lady to come to visit us?"

Nash wanted to scream absolutely not, but instead he said, "Perhaps. We have a full schedule of parties and balls to attend. She has already met you, Mother."

"It was a small luncheon, hardly a formal welcome to our home, her home," his mother said as she tapped a dainty foot firmly against the floor. "She should show respect to the line that she is to be a member of."

"It is not she who has the problem coming here, Mother. I do not want you to terrorise her." Nash regretted the word instantly, but his mother's ire was at least firmly focused on him again.

Her gaze was never more intimidating than when she sensed an insult to herself. "I was right when I said that you viewed me as a burden."

"That is not it at all, Mother. It is just that you are a very refined woman, and Lady Callum is from an upbringing in Scotland where our stringent customs are viewed as an oddity. You might very well scare the young lady right back to Scotland." Nash sighed as he saw her soften a little.

She patted her curls. "My great-grandmother was from Scotland. Did you know that, Nash?"

It was unusual for her to use his given name these days and he looked at her when she did so. "I do recall the story, yes," he admitted.

Her smile took on a nostalgic quality as she spoke. "I remember being a child and spending a summer in Scotland, along the northern shore. It was as though giants had trod there and left behind such beauty."

"I think she is from northern Scotland," Nash said as he tried to remember. "Brodie, I think."

His mother nodded. "Oh, yes. That would be northern Scotland. Lovely country. You really should go after you are wed."

"You should come too if you miss it so," Nash said before he remembered that there would be no wedding. Then again, he could always take his mother to visit her ancestral home as a trip of their own.

His mother came over and put her hands on either side of Nash's face tenderly. "You would really take me along with you? Do you not think you should take your wife aside and ask her first?"

"Well, even if she disapproves there is nothing against me taking my mother to visit her ancestral homeland," Nash said with a smile that for once he did not have to force.

She looked happy, happier than he had seen her in a long while.

"I think you are truly becoming quite the duke. Your father was right that you simply needed time. I am sorry that I vexed you so about marriage. I knew that finding the right woman would help you become the man I knew you could be." She stepped back as if to look at him fully. "I see that man before me now, Nash. Or should I say truly for the first time, Lord Torrington."

The stars were shining brightly outside the hall where society had gathered. It was an exclusive ball and one that Emmeline was certain

she had only received an invitation for because of her association with Lord Torrington. She saw many faces she had seen before and a few that she had not.

To her great relief, Lord Hawley was in attendance. He gave her a nod of his head as he passed by with a group. Emmeline needed to speak to him, but it would have to wait. She turned and almost ran into Lord Torrington. "Forgive me for sneaking up on you," He said with a chuckle.

She raised her hands and waved off his concern. "I should have been more aware of what was going on around me."

"I was wondering if I might steal you for a few moments away from your friend Lord Hawley and greedily keep you to myself for a while?" Lord Torrington's words were soft to not carry, and Emmeline realised it added good effect, because he had to lean over to whisper the words to her, making the gesture look intimate.

She smiled at him and laid her hand upon the arm he offered her. "My brother asked me about the engagement party. I told him I thought you were handling most of the arrangements."

"Indeed, I already have it under control," Lord Torrington confirmed. "But you are welcome to give me any advice that you would like. I will take it into consideration."

She shrugged. "It is just another party is not? I assume your mother is doing the decorating and so on?"

"Oh, yes, she is quite thrilled to put her expertise to use." There was a smile on his lips that held amusement. "She is actually interested in visiting your castle."

Emmeline raised her eyebrows. "Is this in revenge for me not going to her party?"

"Not quite," Lord Torrington said with a wry grin. "You see I mentioned that you were from Scotland. I failed to remember that her family was originally from Scotland, her great-grandmother to be precise."

The very idea that Lord Torrington was related to someone from Scotland warmed her heart. Her homesickness had become terrible, it

seemed. "I would not mind her visiting at all. It is nice to find ties to home even this far away. My brother hardly counts as he is more English than anyone I have ever met."

Lord Torrington stifled a laugh. "Have you considered that he was rescued waif?"

"Oh, that is wretched," Emmeline whispered to keep people from eavesdropping. "Honestly, what passes for friendship between you and my brother baffles me."

He looked thoroughly amused by her words. "And ladies are not so similar?"

"Well, ladies are more subtle," Emmeline said, lifting her shoulders. "It appears that the dancing is starting." She peered over at the master of ceremonies, who was making his way toward the platform where the musicians were.

Lord Torrington favoured the platform at one end of the wide hall with only a glance. "If by subtle you mean that women talk about each other behind their backs instead of to their faces then I can agree with you."

"You seem very jaded for having never been much in feminine company. Has your mother truly coloured your vision of females so?" Emmeline regarded him with frustration. His dark-brown eyes watched her with such intensity she wondered what he was thinking. "Is there something you want to say?"

He shook his head. "What would there be for me to say?"

"You just seem as though you want to say something." Emmeline watched him closely. "If you will not tell me what it was, then perhaps you should dance with me, Your Grace."

Lord Torrington looked around at the couples forming at the edges of the dance floor. He conceded by leading her towards the edge of the floor, where they took their place among the couples. They waited for the floor to be opened for dancing and then Lord Torrington led her onto the floor.

He truly was an exquisite dancer, even if he did not much enjoy dancing. She leaned on him as much as the dance allowed and let him

lead her in the steps. The music was lively as they spun, the other couples dipping in and out of her vision as they too twirled around them.

By the time they finished the dance, Emmeline could feel her cheeks had reddened with the exertion. She laughed as they stepped out from under the chandeliers that lit the dance floor. She could feel Lord Torrington's hand lightly at the base of her spine in such an intimate gesture that she wondered if he were doing it deliberately to take the steam out of the rumours about Lord Hawley.

"Refreshment?" Lord Torrington looked at her questioningly.

Emmeline placed her hand over her chest and nodded. "I think I might need it. That was a very rousing dance. I do hope they have some slower ones or we might all perish."

"Well, no one said you had to dance every dance, Lady Callum," Lord Torrington said with a chuckle, "But yes, I do believe they will have some slower ones as well."

Emmeline followed Lord Torrington to the refreshment table and accepted the drink he offered her. "Hmm, that has a very light fruity taste."

"I thought you might prefer that to the house punch. It is rather strong."

Emmeline gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you for that. I can actually smell it from here."

"They are a little heavy handed," Lord Torrington agreed. He took a cup of the same drink he had given Emmeline.

She spotted Lord Hawley, who looked at her and then at Lord Torrington. She too looked at Lord Torrington, who was sipping his drink watching the couples meander along the edges of the dance floor bantering to see who would dance with whom and for which dance.

She wanted very much to talk to Lord Hawley, but she also liked spending time with Lord Torrington. For his reputation of not having much interest in womenfolk, he was actually rather a gentleman when it came to his manner. She forced her mind away from him as it

threatened to go back down the path Francesca had sent her on at the start of the season.

Lord Torrington and she had struck up a deal. She would see that the deal was maintained. That was all.

“What are you thinking about?” his voice interrupted her thoughts.

Emmeline was thinking of how he would be as a husband, but her mouth said, “I thought that I should talk to Lord Hawley soon. He keeps looking this way.”

“Does he?” Lord Torrington peered in the direction that Emmeline was looking, but she hit him on the arm. “Fair lady, why do you accost me?”

“Hush. You might think yourself clever, but others are likely to only see it as a foundation of another rumour. I need no more of those.”

“What rumour would it be? Lord Torrington makes jest at would-be suitor of his betrothed?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

Emmeline sighed. “Firstly, we are not betrothed yet.” She held up her hand when he went to speak. “Secondly, Lord Hawley is my friend, and I will not have him made fun of.”

“I am sorry.” Lord Torrington said, which was so out of character for him that she stopped and stared at him. “I shall make myself scarce so that he will not be afraid to appear.”

Before Emmeline could say anything else, he left. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed their exchange, but they all appeared to be engrossed in their own conversations. She breathed out and tried to relax, but she was very nervous about the fact that Lord Hawley might have been avoiding coming over for more than just another man’s presence.

She waited a long while and finally gave up that he might approach her. She walked to the entrance to see if she could find her brother, but a voice called out. “Lady Callum!”

“Lord Hawley,” she said in surprise as she turned. “I thought you might have been avoiding me.”

He looked down at his feet. "I thought perhaps the same for you. I noticed that Lord Torrington stayed by your side, so I figured that perhaps he had heard the rumours."

"Oh, we have," Emmeline said softly. "Lord Torrington is not easily threatened by such things. We understand each other, and we know our minds, so it little matters what others say. I was worried that perhaps it was you who wanted to stay clear of the rumours."

To her surprise he chuckled. "To tell the truth, it is such a foreign thing for me to be the talk of anything it is really quite a novelty. Besides, as long as it does not hurt you, then I do not care what they say of me."

Emmeline smiled. "In that case, do you wish to escort me onto the dance floor?"

"I would be honoured."

Emmeline was struck by the differences in Lord Hawley and Lord Torrington once again as they danced. Lord Hawley made her smile. She could let her guard down around him, but there was something she could not quite place about the feeling that he provoked in her. Even as he led her off the dance floor, she found herself still trying to define what this man was to her. Was he a suitor? Did he feel that way about her? He certainly seemed to.

"Are you quite well?" Lord Hawley asked her.

Emmeline nodded. "Of course, I think I need a bite to eat." She made her way to the refreshment table and looked over the offerings, settling on a small sandwich that had crisp, sweet vegetables in it. "That's rather good," she said to herself.

"Have you not eaten a cucumber sandwich before?" Lord Hawley asked.

"We did not have them growing up. My father always insisted on mutton cut very thinly to go on sandwiches."

"Mutton," Lord Hawley repeated. "I sometimes forget why you have that lovely accent."

She covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed. "Yes," she said.

“It is true that I was a Scottish bairn through and through, but here I am rediscovering my roots, and cucumber sandwiches.”

For propriety's sake, they parted ways after refreshments and saw no more of each other at the ball. Emmeline left feeling better that Lord Hawley would hold her in no poor esteem because of the rumours. Still, as she left and headed home with her brother, she felt heavy.

The heaviness did not go away even after she had dressed for the night. She lay in bed waiting for sleep to claim her, but only the night birds came with their peculiar sounds. Emmeline rolled over onto her side.

She did not know when sleep overtook her. All she knew was that she was awake suddenly in a ballroom that was not at all like any ballroom she had ever seen. Everyone wore masks and danced with abandon, much like parties Emmeline had only read about in books.

A man grabbed her around her waist, and Emmeline let him pull her into a dance. She could not tell who he was, but she saw others as they twirled around the room. She saw Francesca, Lord Hawley, and even Lady Grayson.

“Who are you?” Emmeline asked.

He shook his head. “Do you not recognise your husband?” His laughter was deep and rich as he pulled off his mask revealing a very amused Lord Torrington.

Emmeline jolted upright in her bed. “Oh bother,” she mumbled to herself. She had been so concerned about everything else that she had not even noticed that she had grown to love the dark-haired duke.

“Well, that is just not going to work.” She rubbed her face as if she could scour away the memory of the dream. If she could only go back to being ignorant of the feelings, it would be better, because no matter what she felt, she had made a deal.

Emmeline got up and went to her desk. She pulled out a piece of paper and began writing another letter to Caeley. It was all she could think to do.

Dear Caeley,

I hope by the time this reaches you that you will be able to hold that wee

one of yours. I miss you and everyone at home fiercely. There are times I want to just grab a carriage and run away.

So much has happened here that I do not know quite where to begin, or if I even should. I wish you were here. Is that not the most selfish thing you have ever heard? But yet, there it is.

I just woke from a dream that has me still in its grips, and I guess I just needed a piece of home to ground me again. I do not know if I will be myself again until I can stand on that rocky shore and feel the sea on my skin. I should go and try to sleep again.

Send my love to all. God be with you.

Emmeline.

She looked at the letter and left it to dry. The bedcovers beckoned her, but she did not know if she dared go to sleep. What if her mind chose to betray her friendship to Lord Torrington again?

There was nothing she could do but try to sleep. Not sleeping would only end with her in the bed and doctors poking her. She had no great interest in seeing a doctor any time soon.

She fell into the bed as one would cold water, wanting to get it over with. She sank into the covers and pulled them over her head.

The next time she roused was when the sunlight came through her window. "Good morning, Miss," Jasmine's chipper voice said, prompting Emmeline to poke her head out from under the covers. "Gracious, are you ill?"

"No," Emmeline said as she rolled out of bed. "I had trouble sleeping."

Jasmine nodded. "I have had nights like that myself. Some warm milk or tea usually helps."

"I did not even think of it," Emmeline admitted. "I got up and wrote a letter." Remembering the letter, Emmeline quickly slipped it into her book where she kept her letters to be sent. Thankfully she had not written anything that needed to not be shared.

The watchful eyes of Jasmine followed her. "Do you wish me to help you dress now? Or would you like breakfast?"

"Run a bath for me?" Emmeline sank into the chair in front of her desk.

Jasmine was swiftly about the task that Emmeline had set for her. When she finally came back into the room, Jasmine eyed Emmeline with worry. "Doctor Tate is a very nice fellow."

"Honestly, I had a bad dream. It sounds very silly when I say it in the sunlight, but it did not seem that way last night." Emmeline got up and followed Jasmine to her tub. "I am sure I will be my old self as soon as I have had a bath."

Jasmine nodded. "You are probably right, Miss. Do you wish me to bring your breakfast up while you bathe?"

"That would be nice," Emmeline said softly as she sank into the warm water. Jasmine had put some rose water into the bath. Emmeline could smell the faint scent of it and it lingered on her skin.

As soon as the maid was gone, Emmeline lay back in the tub and sank down as far as she could. It was not her ocean, but it would do for now. The dream already seemed to be losing its substance. It was just a ghostly tatter then, and soon the warm water would wash the rest of it away too.

Jasmine was back long before Emmeline had considered getting out of the tub. "Your breakfast, Miss." Jasmine popped her head into the bathroom. "You look very relaxed. Are you feeling better?"

"Much," Emmeline said with relief. "And I am starving." She got out of the tub as Jasmine hurried to wrap a towel around her and dry her off. "I can do that, Jasmine."

Jasmine's head bobbed up and down. "I know, but I am worried that I will not be as good a lady's maid as Miss Durant was. She is a lot to live up to."

"Nonsense. I like the way you do things. You should do things the way that Jasmine would, not other people." Emmeline finished drying off and slipped on the dressing robe that Jasmine offered her. "Now come, let us go sit down and eat."

"As you wish, Miss."

"See, you have already learned that I am stubborn. That is a very Jasmine thing to do." Emmeline gave the young maid a bright smile.

Chapter 10

Emmeline sat in a rather undignified position on the floor beside her bed. How silly a position it was did not dawn on her sad mind until the door swung open after the briefest of knocks. A very startled Jasmine squeaked and clung to the towel she was bringing in.

“Oh, Miss! I didn’t know you were in here. Master Pentworth said you were out taking a walk.” Jasmine begged forgiveness with her hands as she set the towel down on the bed.

Emmeline shook her head. “There is no need for you to apologise. I should have been out, but I just let my mind get the better of me.”

“Is something the matter?” Jasmine sank down into the floor next to Emmeline.

Emmeline picked worriedly at her muslin dress that was canopied around her knees as she sat with them pulled to her chest. She had not sat like that since she was a child and she laughed at herself. “I am only being overly dramatic, I think.”

“I would think that you would be rather happy with your engagement party right around the corner.” Jasmine’s face held a soft look of confusion that Emmeline could well understand.

She lifted her shoulders and smiled at Jasmine, a little embarrassed. “I suppose I should be the happiest woman around these parts. I have everything that I wished for. And yet, here I am.”

“Nerves are to be expected,” Jasmine mused. “You mustn’t be too hard on yourself. You said that you aren’t used to all this society nonsense, but it’ll be over soon.”

Emmeline nodded slowly. She was certain that Lord Torrington had no need for drama at the party and it would go smoothly. Yet still she worried that the very ground would crumble beneath her and she would be left with nothing to stand on.

“Lord Torrington is due soon,” she whispered almost to herself.

Jasmine’s face brightened. “That’s a nice thing for you. It’ll be good to

see your gentleman and it might calm those nerves.”

“Men are baffling.” Emmeline wrapped her arms around her knees. “It is hard to know what they want or what they think.”

“You seem to read your gentleman fine. You two are perfectly matched. I have seen you together enough to know that.”

The confidence on Jasmine’s face brought Emmeline’s doubts to the surface. “I fear I am making a mistake, Jasmine. One I cannot undo or control.”

“Have you changed your mind about marrying?” The look on the maid’s face was a mixture of confusion and horror.

“No. It is nothing like that.”

“Then has something happened between you and Lord Torrington?”

Emmeline took a deep breath. “No.”

“Then you must put all this worry aside. You will spoil your own happiness by overthinking it.” Jasmine gave the nod as if to make her own point. “My mother always said that a happy heart belongs to those of a simple mind.”

Emmeline was not sure if Jasmine’s mother had meant that as a particularly nice statement, but it made her smile all the same. “I know I should not worry so and that things will work out. But I cannot help it. I am my mother’s daughter and worrying is what we Callum ladies do best.”

“Maybe that’s what bothers you,” Jasmine said. At Emmeline’s furrowed brow she explained. “You don’t have your mother beside you to talk you through this like most young ladies. Perhaps if you had a maternal hand to guide you, then your worries would fade? Have you thought about speaking with Lord Torrington’s mother? She is soon to be your family after all.”

Her words were wise ones, but it tore at Emmeline’s heart so savagely that she had to look away from Jasmine lest the girl see the guilt in her eyes. “No. I could never bother her with this. It is silly nonsense.”

“If you say so, Miss. But you can always talk to me, or perhaps Miss

Durant.”

Emmeline turned to look at Jasmine in time to see the woman frown as she spoke Francesca’s name. She leaned her head to the side. “You and Francesca do not get along very well, do you?”

Jasmine hurriedly rose to her feet, all pink cheeks and swishing of skirts. “I didn’t mean any harm. I know that you hold her in esteem.”

“Do relax, Jasmine.” Emmeline rose with her and put her hands on the maid’s shoulders. “Please, do not feel embarrassed. Lady Durant can be quite stern in her views, but I have already told you that I want you to do things as you would and not hold yourself to her standards.”

Jasmine took a deep breath and whispered, “She is just unsatisfied with her lot in life, Miss. I find that she likes to take it out on those she considers below her station.”

“I have had so much on my mind that I did not notice how she behaved to the rest of the household,” Emmeline replied softly. “It is I who should apologise, Jasmine. I feel as if I have done a wrong by raising her above her station.”

Jasmine shook her head. “You have done no wrong. Some women are dissatisfied no matter what, and no one holds that against you.”

“Should I speak with her?” Emmeline very much wanted to ensure that the rest of the household was not enduring any punishment from her companion, as she felt personally responsible no matter what Jasmine had said.

With a sigh, Jasmine shook her head again. “I fear that might make it worse. You will be married before long and she will hopefully be on her way elsewhere.”

“What of you then?” Emmeline asked as she smoothed her dress.

Jasmine’s mouth curved down in a frown as her brow furrowed. “I am afraid I don’t understand, Miss.”

“What shall you be doing? Shall you stay on with me as my lady’s maid?”

Jasmine seemed to ponder the question. She reached over and

scooped up the towels as if doing the action made her more comfortable. "You have a lady's maid already, do you not?"

"I have Caeley, yes." Emmeline turned and inspected her reflection to see if she had done herself a disservice with her time on the floor. "But she will need time to be with her baby and she is in Scotland. I could use a lady's maid for here in London as well."

Jasmine leaned forward and whispered, "Do you think that Lord Pentworth will not keep me on then?"

"Oh, I am certain he would. But if I can steal you away, then I would be delighted to do so." Emmeline turned and gave the maid a bright smile.

Jasmine took the towel and placed it on a table near the door. "I would be honoured to stay in your service, Miss"

"I feel better knowing that I will know at least someone in my new household." Emmeline turned her eyes back to the mirror and deemed herself no worse for the wear.

Jasmine's voice spoke softly behind Emmeline and she could see the woman come to stand behind her. "I wish I could make you less nervous. Perhaps after the party, things will settle for you, Miss."

"I certainly hope that they will. I should make an appearance in the garden. After all, that is where I am supposed to be."

"Do you need anything, Miss?"

"No. You have been quite helpful." Emmeline had already turned towards the door when it flew open. Both women were startled by the sudden intrusion.

Francesca blinked at them. "Forgive me, Lady Callum. I was coming to fetch Jasmine."

"Oh." Jasmine clasped her hands to her face. "I forgot. I was to bring Miss Durant her tea!"

Francesca narrowed her eyes at Jasmine, but before she could speak Emmeline put her hand over her heart. "Forgive me for keeping her. We had a situation that she has been helping me with."

"A situation?" Francesca spoke as if she were highly suspicious.

Emmeline nodded emphatically. "There was a mouse. I was just leaving when I saw it and I leapt onto the bed. Jasmine came in and found me."

Francesca looked at Jasmine. "And where is this mouse?" She looked around as if she very much expected to see the thing lying dead.

"Oh, I scared it away," Jasmine replied swiftly, which earned her a nod from Emmeline.

Francesca's lips flattened as she pressed them together. "I suppose we should have one of the young men come and have a look. Perhaps they can determine how it got in."

"That is a good idea," Emmeline agreed. "Now that I am free of the rodent's clutches, I am going to go take that walk. Enjoy your tea, Francesca."

Francesca dipped her head to Emmeline. Emmeline gave Jasmine a smile, which the maid returned. As she left, Emmeline hoped that her ruse had turned Francesca's vengeance away from Jasmine.

Once Lady Callum was out of the door Francesca rounded on Jasmine. It was gratifying to see the maid flinch. She put on a sweet smile. "Forgive me for startling you. I was concerned when you did not return to my room."

Jasmine did not seem to know how to handle Francesca's sudden niceness. "It is quite all right. I'll fetch your tea now." The maid was out of the room before Francesca could utter even another syllable.

She smiled and took one last look around the bedroom. She called after Jasmine's retreating back, "Be sure to get the lads up here to check over Lady Callum's room. We must make sure it is suitable for her to sleep in."

"Of course, Miss!" Jasmine took off down the hall at such a speed that Francesca thought the maid would fall to her death.

Shaking her head, Francesca pulled the door to Lady Callum's room closed and went back to her own room. She settled down in the reading chair next to the window. The lamp on the table beside her caught the sunlight that filtered in between the tree branches outside.

Quicker than she thought possible, Jasmine returned with a tray. "Here you go, Miss." Jasmine deposited the tray next to the lamp on Francesca's table. "Is there anything else you need?"

"I was wondering if you might sit with me." Francesca saw the surprise pass over Jasmine's face. "That is if you wish. You are certainly not commanded to. I simply feel awful about how we have gotten on since I arrived here."

Jasmine peered at Francesca through doubtful eyes. "You do, Miss?"

"Yes." Francesca nodded and waved to the chair by her desk. "Please, will you not sit?"

Jasmine seemed reluctant to agree, but eventually nodded. She dragged the chair near to Francesca. When she had taken her seat, Francesca smiled.

"For the past seven years, I have scarcely been anywhere long enough to call it home. I go into ladies' services and prepare them for the season. When they are happily wed, I go somewhere else." Francesca sighed heavily and laid her hands in her lap. "I am tired of it all, Jasmine. I am sorry if I took any of that out on you."

Jasmine frowned, but gave Francesca a tentative smile. "It does sound quite horrible. I can't even imagine."

"I know it asks a lot of you to forgive me callousness. I was simply angry that I had to help yet another woman wed when I myself was reined in from doing so."

"But you are a lady's companion now," Jasmine said with a wary tone.

Francesca nodded eagerly. "Yes. I had to put my foot down and barter with the earl for that. I hoped that perhaps it would help me to win my own way in this world so that I can stop relying on others."

"Being a lady's companion does not seem such a bad lot." Jasmine's words were measured. "I really should be going so that I can help

Cook.”

Francesca nodded. “I am sorry that I delayed you. I just merely wanted to tell you that I meant no harm by my actions.”

“Of course, Miss. No need to worry over it.”

Francesca watched Jasmine leave the room and sighed. She would not sway the young maid to her side so easily. That was a pity. Francesca was certain that Jasmine would be a useful source of information.

She leaned back in her chair and swirled some sugar into her teacup with her spoon as her mind drifted. Thus far there was nothing she could use to put herself closer to either the earl or the duke. The only men she had managed to strike any acquaintance with were merchants. And that was hardly the step up into society that she wanted.

Francesca deserved more than a mere merchant, and she still could not fathom how Lady Callum had garnered the adoration of both the duke and Lord Hawley. If the rumours were true, and Francesca had seen with her own eyes how intimate Lord Hawley and Lady Callum appeared to be, then there was a good chance that she might just end up with a duke indebted to her if she could figure out a way to save him some embarrassment.

She sipped her tea and thought over the situation. There had to be a way, and Francesca was never one to give up easily. She would find it.

Lady Grayson and the other acquaintances Francesca had made through her position as Lady Callum’s companion had proven chatty but mostly redundant. All the ladies seemed capable of doing were repeating or embellishing stories that Francesca had heard a dozen echoes of already. If Jasmine would not be an unwitting spy, then Francesca would simply have to follow Lady Callum more closely to see if she could unravel what sort of spell the woman had woven to get the duke to go along with this preposterous betrothal.

How no one else could see how absurd the match between Lord Torrington and Lady Callum was aside from her was baffling. She slipped her hands around her teacup and sighed. She had heard of ladies having something over a man that would make him fall in line, but surely the incident in the library did not bear that much importance in the mind of the earl or the duke to weigh them down in

that regard.

Francesca set her tea down in dissatisfaction. She would have to keep a closer eye on the lady. The woman must have secret wiles hidden behind her boarish exterior.

She went to the window. The pattern of hedges and roses intertwined to make the gardens laid out before her. Among the hedges she spotted Lady Callum wandering in an aimless fashion.

As she stood looking out over the garden, a male figure strode out from the direction of the patio. Francesca could see that it was Lord Torrington. She bit her lip at the sight of him. He was a striking figure, even if unforgivably dull for his taste in women.

The two figures below met near one of the benches. Lady Callum sat while the duke stood. There seemed to be some sort of a heated discussion taking place and Francesca leaned closer to the window even though there was no chance to make out what they were saying.

An idea struck her that perhaps she should talk to Gerald. He was a man of few words, but she had often overlooked him. He would have the perfect opportunity to see what was happening between the duke and Lady Callum. Francesca smiled. Perhaps she would get to the bottom of the mystery after all.

He leaned towards the woman in front of him who had her hands firmly on her hips, as if she were waiting for a reason to lay into him. "She has left the window," Nash whispered.

Lady Callum blew out a puff of air and turned back toward the garden. "Gerald is still watching." Her voice was soft and full of something that Nash could not discern. It might have been anger, but it was gone when she spoke again. "Have you and Harcourt decided about the planning of the engagement party?"

"My mother was insistent that she wanted to throw the party at our home, but Harcourt's stubbornness has won through." Nash had been quite relieved when Harcourt had taken his side. It had genuinely surprised him that Harcourt had persisted long enough to win out over his mother, whose will was as if iron.

Lady Callum breathed a sigh of relief. "He had not mentioned that, but I imagine he shall come to me soon enough, given that he will probably want my input. He would do better to have Francesca's opinions than mine. I hardly know what a good party should be."

"Having an eye for what is fashionable in high society, does not always qualify someone for planning parties. Dresses really do not make or break an evening." Nash removed his gloves and stretched his fingers. He longed to shed the coat, but thought that might be too brazen even for Lady Callum's indulgent company.

Lady Callum glanced around at the now empty window where Francesca had been peering down earlier. "She will be quite eager to figure out what was so amiss between us."

"And I am glad that she will have a way to spend her time other than tormenting me," Nash said with a grunt. The look Lady Callum gave him made Nash regret his words. "She is a little overt in her attentions toward me. And while it is harmless, it is also grating."

Lady Callum shrugged. She gave him a small smile. "She is a beauty. I should think that attentions from her would be quite pleasing to most men."

"You must not have met many women like her in Scotland. We have them aplenty at court and they are not to be trusted." Nash felt a bit of a sting that Lady Callum did not seem the least bit offended that Miss Durant had been flirtatious with him. Then again, he had made it quite clear that he had not been impressed by the Frenchwoman, so there was no due cause for jealousy, even if she had been attached to him by the heartstrings.

She tugged her shawl around her shoulders and Nash thought it had to be from habit. The heat in the sun was too warm to warrant a chill. "Jasmine said something earlier about Miss Durant that made me wonder if I could trust her. I have not told anyone of our arrangement, mind you. But I have been worried that Miss Durant would guess."

"What did she say?" Nash slapped his gloves against his open palm. He did not like the idea of the cagey Frenchwoman figuring out their plans. She could cause a big enough scandal to ruin Lady Callum's chances of ever finding a good match.

Lady Callum clutched her shawl, clearly uncomfortable repeating

what her maid had said. “She said that Miss Durant was not happy with her lot in life and that she tended to take it out on those below her station.”

“And you think she might be using your good graces to lever herself up into nobility?” Nash could not say he was surprised. Just two years ago he had heard of a duke marrying a courtesan. It might not happen that often, but it did happen.

Lady Callum sighed. “I would hate to think that any love she had shown me was out of selfishness. But I have learnt that people of society often do not get as attached to such notion as do I.”

“It will all be behind us soon and she will not be able to make trouble for you after the engagement party. If she wishes to marry above her station, then all speed to her. She just need not look in my direction.” Nash chuckled at the look on Lady Callum’s face. “Breathe. She has no reason to cause you woe. After all, you have aided her at every turn.”

Her face fell as she whispered, “I know your words are true, but if I have failed so miserably to judge her, then could I not also have failed to value others appropriately?”

“Are you now unsure of your choice with Lord Hawley?” Nash eyed Lady Callum with interest. She lifted a hand to brush her hair from her face as it fought to be free of her bonnet.

She offered him a wry smile that made him remember the first time he saw her. “You do not need to chide me about being too flighty in my impressions. Besides, even if I failed to find a match, you have kept up your end of our arrangement splendidly. I owe you a great debt, Lord Torrington.”

“We are even and matched in gratitude,” Nash said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I fear that the time I can spend calling on you is fast approaching a close. If I tarry too long past the acceptable limits of society, Gerald might very well take me to task about it.”

Lady Callum smiled and glanced over at the butler, who waited on the patio, watching them at a comfortable distance. “He is quite a mystery that one.”

“Gerald? He is just a man of his time. He tries to be staunch and proper, but even he knows how youth is.” Nash lifted his hand to the

butler who dipped his head in return. "Shall I call on you tomorrow?"

She gave him an inquisitive look. "You call far more often on me than my brother these days."

"Well, we are soon to be betrothed," Nash replied with a bow. As he rose he gave her a smile. "At least for the time being," he added in a whisper to her.

Lady Callum curtsied. "Tomorrow would be wonderful. I shall expect you in the morning."

"And I shall be here when I am expected," he bantered back easily. He breathed in a deep breath of the rose-scented air. "I almost dread going to work."

Lady Callum laughed. "You need to set your mind to getting my brother back on track with your merger."

"I fear that might not happen until you are safely and happily wed," Nash frowned.

She frowned with him. "That is true. He is likely to be at least a little displeased with you when we break the engagement. But these things do happen, Lord Torrington. It will not sour him for long."

"You are wise as ever, Lady Callum." Nash slipped his gloves on, even if he was loathe to do so with the heat. "Tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow," she echoed back as her hazel eyes watched him intently.

Nash felt some regret as he stepped away from her and walked towards Gerald. It was an odd little nagging ache that Nash could not determine the source of. It was true that he had felt a warmth blossom for Lady Callum over the last while. But the plan had not changed.

"Lord Torrington," Gerald said Nash reached him. He gave him a small bow.

Nash returned the bow. "Tell Harcourt that I shall call tomorrow morning, will you?"

"Of course, Your Grace." Gerald's reverent tone left Nash in no doubt that the man would indeed ensure the message was given the utmost

importance.

He left the Pentworth household behind and felt like a piece of himself stayed behind. He barely even remembered the ride across town. "Charles," Nash called as he entered the shipping company building.

"Here, Your Grace," Charles' voice called from the other room. A few moments later, Charles himself appeared. "How was your visit?"

"It went well. Has there been anyone in?"

"That Grissom fellow came by. I took down a message for him. He seemed very put out that you were not here waiting on his arrival." Charles frowned as if the memory of him put him in a bad disposition.

The idea that Grissom had thought to call upon him put Nash in an ill mood as well. Now that the man had called, he was left with little recourse but to visit him at his home or place of business. Nash had no doubt that was the man's plan when Grissom called while he was out.

He shrugged off his coat and rid himself of his gloves. "I will send one of the boys to the pier to inform him of my apologies and to offer an appointment to come and see me."

"Not going to take his bait?" Charles asked the question with a grin.

Nash grunted. "That man is not going to get me looped into calling upon him at his doorstep. He can keep this professional. I have no need of another household to dine with every other week."

"Ah, speaking of dining, you received an invitation from that lord you dined with the other week... with the daughters." Charles grinned.

Having known Charles since they were both young, Nash chuckled at the look. He thought for a moment. "Did he mention Lady Callum being invited also?"

"No, Your Grace."

Nash sighed in relief. "Then it would be inappropriate for me to accept."

"He made it sound like a business matter." Charles cut his eyes to the

letter on Nash's desk.

There was no point in reading the letter and Nash shrugged. "That man no more wants to ship anything than I want to become a grain farmer. He merely wants to get me in the presence of another of his daughters."

"What shall I say then? Or am I merely misplacing the letter?" Charles walked to the desk as Nash came to sit down. He picked up the letter as if it displeased him as he waited on Nash to respond.

Nash thought for a moment before he replied. "Tell him that Lady Callum and I are extremely busy and that I shall be happy to meet with him after the end of the season."

"As you wish, Your Grace. Being betrothed suits you, Your Grace."

"Does it?"

"Yes." He tucked the letter under his arm. "I must admit that when I first saw you just now that I thought you had perhaps had a disagreement with your lady."

"Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"You had that look on your face that my father gets when my mother is unhappy with him." Charles laughed. "You look happy enough now, though. I had better write up this reply."

A moment later, Charles was gone and Nash was left with the silence of the room.

Emmeline eyed her brother with a growing sense of concern. "I understand that you want to have the party here, Harcourt. And I think that would be best also. However, I know little about such things. I fear that I would not be able to put on a suitable party."

"It will soon be your duty to put on parties for the duchy. Would it not be better to start here?" Harcourt had a point, but that did not mean that Emmeline had to like it. Besides, she was not going to be responsible for the duchy, yet she could not tell her brother that.

Emmeline sighed heavily. "Fine. But I will not do it alone. I do not think going at such a thing recklessly is really the way to learn about proper hostess duties."

"You have the aid of your ladies and my whole staff at your disposal. Now, if you will let me get back to work, I might be able to afford to pay for the party." Harcourt waved his hand at her dismissively.

Emmeline narrowed her eyes at her brother. She turned and left in a huff. The hallway outside to her surprise was not empty. Cook and Jasmine both were waiting expectantly.

"I suppose you two heard that we have to throw the engagement party?" Emmeline asked the question with embarrassment.

Cook patted Emmeline on the shoulder. "It isn't such a hard thing. You worry over what you want to eat and I shall cook it."

"And music," Jasmine suggested. "We'll need some music."

Emmeline nodded slowly. "There were some musicians at that last party at Lady Grayson's home. I could ask her for a reference."

"Good. And what of the menu?" Cook seemed eager to get on with her work.

Emmeline frowned. "What sort of things would be served at a party?"

"Depends on whether it is more dance or dinner party."

Emmeline was about to respond when Francesca's voice came from behind her. "A dance would be lovely, and such a jubilant way to celebrate an engagement."

They all turned to look at her.

"I think a dance would be grand as well," Emmeline agreed. "If that is okay with you, Cook?"

Francesca did not look pleased that Emmeline was checking with the kitchen staff to see if an arrangement was agreeable. Cook bobbed her head. "Oh yes, that would be fine. Haven't had a dance here in a good while. I can make my special punch and serve up some lovely sandwiches."

“That does sound nice. Your punch is delicious,” Jasmine responded with enthusiasm.

Francesca cleared her throat. When they all looked at her again, she said, “If we are all satisfied with the type of party, then we should move on to what sort of decorations and lighting we should have. I heard Jasmine mention musicians and yes, Lady Callum, the quartet from Lady Grayson’s party would be quite splendid for the ballroom.”

“I fear that this party will be a long ordeal,” Emmeline said with little hope of getting out of planning it. She looked at the ladies. At least she might not have to go through this whole thing alone.

Francesca clapped her hands together in merriment. “Planning a party is grand fun, Lady Callum. You shall see that it is really quite a good thing.”

“Perhaps for you, Francesca. But despite my birth right, I feel woefully out of place in such a predicament.” She really did not know where to start. If Francesca liked to make parties, then perhaps she should just let the woman at it.

Almost as if she had read Emmeline’s mind, Francesca put in, “Just relax and let me handle things. It will all work out wonderfully.”

“As much as I would love to simply allow you to do so, I really should make an effort to see this through. I intend to learn as much about the process as I can, so that I can do my duty as a wife admirably.” Emmeline smiled. “I am going to retire to the library.” As she turned, she met Jasmine’s eyes. Emmeline motioned for the maid to follow her. “If you have any further ideas, Francesca, please feel free to let me know. I really do appreciate all of your help.”

Francesca dipped into an elegant curtsy as Cook left to see to her kitchen duties. Emmeline and Jasmine headed to the library. When they were out of sight of the Frenchwoman, Jasmine said, “I’m surprised you did not let Francesca deal with the party. You didn’t seem thrilled with the idea of managing it.”

“I am not overly joyed by planning it, but that is mostly because I have had little experience doing so. Mother planned dances and such, but they were simple affairs.” Emmeline thought back to those times with a smile. “I would like a simple party, but I know that society here

likes some sparkle. If Francesca can help with the pompous part of it, then I am more than willing to listen. However, I will be expected to do this sort of thing once I am wed.”

Jasmine nodded her agreement. “Of course, Miss. It is wise to use all the resources at your disposal.”

“Can I ask you something?” Emmeline asked as they walked toward the library.

“You can ask me anything, Your Ladyship.”

“Did you know that Francesca had made advances toward Lord Torrington?”

Jasmine’s mouth dropped open. “I had heard talk, but I thought it was just the maids. They are not overly fond of Miss Durant and I didn’t know how much stock to put into their words.”

“Do not speak of it,” Emmeline warned. “I had a talk with the duke this morning where he told me of it.”

“I have seen the duke give her no deference.”

“I would not expect him to do so. He merely told me so that I might be aware of it.” Emmeline opened the library door and whispered, “Truthfully, I do not know if I should trust her. If she has used my friendship so, can her aid be that valuable?”

Jasmine and Emmeline slipped into the library. Jasmine gave her apron a worried wring. “She might be out for herself, but surely she’d not go so far as to throw you into the mire to raise herself up. That would do her little good in the eyes of the duke or the earl.”

“I hope that she sees it that way.” Emmeline went to the book she had left next to her favourite chair. She laid her hand on the book as if to garner comfort from it. “Time will tell, but I do not want to be caught unawares. I feel as though I am already racing to catch up with everyone who was raised in this gilded society.”

Chapter 11

Breakfast at Nash's home brought a certain amount of troubles. His father had returned. Of course, his mother had been very put out that Nash's brother had chosen to stay at the country estate. Nash was fairly relieved that for once his brother's tendency toward sloth was in Nash's favour.

"I thought that perhaps with the child having no mother of her own, that they might consent to allowing me to throw the engagement party," Nash's mother started in for the hundredth time that morning.

Nash's father nodded. It was clear he had already developed deaf ears to the conversation. Nash had not as yet learnt that trick, so he had to grit his teeth. The worst of it would be if Mother forced him to explain yet again why Lady Callum had chosen to do it herself.

It was not something that even needed an explanation. Harcourt and Lady Callum were well within their rights to choose to do the engagement party on their own. Really, he would have thought his parents would be relieved at avoiding the added expense, but apparently that was foolish thinking.

Nash swore he would never put his children through the horror of such an ordeal. Perhaps he would send them all off to a monastery. As he sat there pondering his children's fates as monks, he became aware that his mother was looking at him sternly.

"What?"

Her lips were pressed in such a thin line that they threatened to disappear altogether. "Were you not listening to me at all then?"

"If you were speaking then I suppose I was not. My mind had wandered off somewhere. I do apologise. What were you saying?" Nash was sure it was not important, but manners dictated that he ask all the same.

His mother pinched her nose. "You are becoming your father."

"What was that?" Nash's father looked up at them. Nash was not sure if the man meant the interruption as a jest or not, but the expression

on his mother's face said, clearly, she did not think it was funny.

Nash rose from his seat. "As much as I am loathe to rush off, I have a morning appointment with Lady Callum."

"Oh, you are going to call on your young lady," Nash's mother said with obvious pleasure. "I am already planning the party that we shall throw for her after your engagement party. We need something to really welcome her to the family."

Nash dared not even get into a discussion with his mother over family again. He simply could not bear to have her go over yet again when he was allowed to write to relatives about the engagement and in what order he could do so. It was truly amazing that anyone got married at all with all the etiquette that had to be followed.

There were certainly some of his relations that Nash was certain did not make it through all the extensive rituals involved. He dipped his head absentmindedly to his mother to acknowledge her words as he pondered if it were possible to simply get engaged by proxy. Nash was still thinking on it when he went to the stables to fetch his favourite horse.

It was a lovely day and a ride suited him. It would be nice to navigate the streets more freely. The stable lads were off like cannonballs to get his horse and harness as soon as they saw him approaching.

There was nothing quite so grand as riding on a day where the clouds held at bay and let the sunlight dry up London's streets. Days like today were rare in London, especially these days when there seemed to be a constant pall across the city either figurative or literal. "Hoping you aren't going down by the factory on Lawson Street, Your Grace. The newspapers said there was a fire there last night," one of the stable boys said as he led the horse out to Nash.

"A fire, eh?" Nash checked the straps out of habit and found them nice and tight.

The boy's head bobbed up and down. "Yes, Your Grace. There's talk it was set on purpose."

"Sounds like luddites," Nash commented.

The other lad hit the first on the shoulder. "Told ya that's what they're

called.”

“Leave off now,” the first stable boy said to his friend. “Just thought the duke might want to steer clear of that area.”

“I assure you that I am not going in that direction, but I do thank you for the warning.” Nash gave the two boys a couple of coins before he swung up into the saddle.

He thought of the fire and all the trials as of late. With wars destabilising everything and courts shouting libel at every turn, the days seemed dark indeed. Nash looked up at the clear skies.

“Not today though,” Nash whispered to the sky as he set out for the Pentworth household, which was only a few streets from his own home.

As often was the case, it took far too little time to get to where he was going when the weather was nice enough to actually enjoy the ride. As he slid out of his saddle and handed the stallion off to the stable boy at the Pentworth household, Nash breathed in one last breath before heading up the steps.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Gerald said as he opened the door.

Nash gave him a look of surprise before he smiled. “Filling in for the doorman now, too?”

“He is under the weather, Your Grace,” Gerald said, giving Nash a bow.

Nash hurried on through the door to stop Gerald from having to hold it open for any longer. The wooden door was deceptively heavy. “I trust that I am expected?”

“Lady Callum awaits you in the conservatory, Your Grace,” Gerald said. “Lord Pentworth is there as well.”

Nash nodded and saw himself to the conservatory. After all, he knew this house as well as any member of Harcourt’s household did. He certainly was here enough to have the floor plan mapped out in his mind. He gave the door to the conservatory a sharp rap before peering in. “It is just me,” he called.

Harcourt rolled his eyes as he sat on a loveseat near one of the large windows. “Do come in, Nash.”

Nash stepped fully inside and let the door close to on its own. Lady Callum smiled at him, her white dress showcasing just how fine and pale her hair actually was. He could almost imagine what it would be like to come to one of these things and truly be enthralled with her and her with him. “Lady Callum, you look beautiful this morning.”

“You are too kind, Lord Torrington. Please sit with us. Would you like some tea?” She had already picked up the teapot.

Nash nodded. He accepted the tea graciously as he took a seat next to Harcourt. “I had no idea we were going to be joined by you today, Harcourt. You have been so busy, I thought you might have a lady of your own stashed around here somewhere.”

“Hardly,” Harcourt said with a sigh. “I have simply been working more lately.”

Nash gave his friend a smile. “You would not have to work so hard if you would just sign on with my fleet. Your workload could be almost halved with further profits to boot.”

“Your insistence makes me wary. It is like when you wanted me to pick a particular horse in riding class because you had rigged the saddle.”

He laughed. “You blame your hesitancy on childhood pranks, and yet you insist that I am the less mature one in our friendship.”

Harcourt grumbled under his breath, “Those pranks hurt a good deal.”

Nash wanted to point out that it was Harcourt’s willingness to continue taking his suggestion for horses that kept the pranks going. However, pointing that fact out might hurt his cause as he was very much wanting Harcourt to take his suggestion now. He shrugged. “Do what you will, Harcourt, but it is a more than amicable deal for the both of us.”

Harcourt waved off the whole matter and looked at his sister. “How are the plans for the party going?”

“Quite well, all things considered. I have been getting suggestions

from everyone on how they would do it. Now I have to figure out how I would go about putting on a party of this sort.” Lady Callum sounded more nervous than she probably intended.

Nash assured her, “As long as there is music, dancing and something to drink, then you shall be fine.”

“That much we have covered,” Lady Callum confirmed. “I wish to decorate the house with flowers from the garden, but Miss Durant is not as onboard with that idea.”

Nash tried not to let his confusion show through as he asked, “Why does it matter what she thinks? If you want it done a certain way, then do it your way.”

“That is what I said,” Harcourt chimed in.

Lady Callum shot her brother a look. “I have been doing as I wished for the most part, but I do value her opinion on matters of taste.”

“It is hardly a fashionable dress. What on earth does the current trend of fashion have to do with what you put in vases?” Nash had to admit that the ways of women in this particular capacity were a mystery to him. He had been to plenty of parties that were lovely that had not one stitch of décor that he could ascertain, yet ladies found it ceaselessly fascinating to debate over which colour was the best to use in a vase in September.

Lady Callum sighed. “Fashion has to do with everything around you. Some years patterns are favoured over solids, for instance. It literally runs throughout a house, Lord Torrington.”

“But if you want flowers in vases, then you should put flowers in vases,” Nash said.

Lady Callum laughed. “And I more than likely shall, but I still like to get feedback. Are you going to be this impossible to live with?”

Nash started to retort but caught himself just before he said something that might give away that they both knew they would not be living together. He bit down on his comment and took a sip of tea. At length he said, “I do not think getting married will change me as much as you might be hoping, Lady Callum.”

“Nonsense,” Lady Callum chided. “I think you are a fine man as you are. True, we all have room to grow, but I see no reason to think you should do so more than others.”

Nash regarded the honey-haired woman with a slight smile. Her statement had come fairly close to a compliment and the woman rarely paid those to him outside of light-hearted banter. He supposed the words were mostly for her brother, but he still liked that she had said them.

His eyes were drawn to the sun streaking down from between fluffy clouds outside the large windows of the conservatory. “It really is a beautiful day. I cannot recall seeing a better one since I came to London,” Lady Callum breathed.

Nash glanced over at her. “With as much as it rains here in London, I am not at all surprised that you have not seen such a rare day. Are there many days like this in Scotland?”

“It rains quite often in Scotland too, but it feels different. Here it feels sad, somehow.” Lady Callum’s soft accent came through her words as she spoke of her home. There were times that Nash almost forgot the accent, so accustomed was he to the way she spoke that it was only at times when her accent grew thicker that he really noticed it.

Harcourt nodded. “It really does. I remember as a boy playing on the beach on an overcast day, the wind and sea spray coating me. Still felt better down by that sea than it does on a London street in a downpour.”

“I would not know,” Nash said, setting his teacup back down on the tray.

Lady Callum squinted at Harcourt. “I was beginning to wonder if you remembered anything of your time in Scotland.”

“I remember quite a lot, but I have more memories of England.” Harcourt gave a light-hearted shrug. “I do occasionally miss things from my childhood, but my duties keep me in London.”

Nash looked at Lady Callum. She missed her home. He wondered if she would find a nobleman willing to take on the idea of a property in Scotland, let alone a man willing to move to the northern coast castle that the woman clearly intended to return to.

"I write letters to the lady's maid I had to leave in Scotland. She keeps me apprised of all the happenings back home." Lady Callum seemed to be talking to her brother.

Harcourt shook his finger at Lady Callum. "I recall you riding to London without a lady's maid."

"There was no point in putting you out so that I could have a maid for the ride." Lady Callum waved her hand at her brother as her eyes went to Nash as if for support. "Do you think it would have been a wise use of resources, Your Grace?"

Nash hesitated. "I have no sisters, but my mother never goes anywhere without a lady's maid. It is apparently impossible to get dresses on and off without one."

"That is true, it was a bit of a feat," Lady Callum admitted with a smile that she did not bother to try and hide. "However, I survived just fine."

Harcourt scoffed. "Your hair was a disaster when you arrived."

"It was not." Lady Callum glared at her brother for his preposterous claim. "Why must you insist on making everything such a fuss?"

Harcourt slapped his leg. "I swear, I just heard Father roll over in his grave." He looked at Nash. "She literally used to raise a fuss about every tiny thing. She once even threw a fit about how many seeds a cake had on it."

"That is a grotesque lie," Lady Callum challenged. "I did not care about the amount of seeds, merely what kind of seeds they were. I had a reaction earlier in that season to some seeds that looked similar."

Nash chuckled. "I think you two could pass for being related."

"Funny," Harcourt intoned.

On the night of the party, Lord Hawley put on a brand-new tailored suit. As much as his man had assured him he looked fit enough to steal any lass, Edward was only interested in one lady's heart. He had

a lump in his throat that he was sure all could see as he exited his carriage.

Pentworth Estate, thought Edward. He had never been to this place before but he had dreamed about it. He had dreamed of sweeping in and taking Lady Callum for his own lady. He walked up the steps, remembering at the last moment to bow his head to a passing cluster of ladies he vaguely recognised.

Inside, the house had been decorated with roses and lilies. The air was heavy with the fragrance of the flowers mingled with the powders that the ladies dabbed themselves in with such abundance that Edward wondered what they looked like without all of that pigment. He preferred the natural beauty standard of the day.

And there was a shining example of natural beauty, he thought wryly as Lady Callum came into view greeting guests. He moved along with the crowd until he came alongside her and her brother.

“Lord Pentworth,” Edward said cheerily, grasping the man’s hand in a firm shake. “Pleasure to see you tonight.” He turned his gaze on Lady Callum and had to remind himself to breathe. She looked ethereal. “Lady Callum,” Edward breathed in awe. “You look breath-taking.”

He cursed himself mentally for being such a fool and praising her so in front of her brother. Lady Callum simply smiled sweetly. “You are too kind, Lord Hawley. You make me blush.” Her slim fingers raised into the air, he took the opportunity and grasped them in a delicate embrace in his own impossibly fumbling hand. He dared not kiss those fingers, but he bent his head while holding her hand, as was acceptable to do.

Then it was over and he was forced to walk on by as if she meant no more to him than any other host of any other party. He found himself lingering nearby, feigning interest in this conversation or that conversation. All the words were meaningless. If he lost sight of her, he might lose his courage to do what he had worked himself up to do.

He, Lord Edward Hawley, was going to prove his ancestors’ worth and was going to do something impetuous and daring. He was going to steal the lady love of Lord Torrington right out from under the man’s nose. He knew the engagement would soon be made formal and that his time was short.

“Lord Hawley,” a man’s voice behind him caused him to jump. He caught himself from doing so, but still felt the keen embarrassment as he turned around and spied Lord Torrington watching him with amusement. “Saw you standing here and thought I might come and say hello. We have only managed a few passing phrases this season and I thought I should rectify that, what with Lady Callum being so fond of you.”

Edward swallowed, but the lump in his throat would not budge. “Yes, we have not really talked, have we?”

“Are you well?” Lord Torrington put a hand on his shoulder. “You look like a man who could use a drink. Come, let us find one.”

Edward could scarcely do anything else. He had a grip of iron on his shoulder. He resigned himself to go with the duke to find a drink. Truth be told, a stiff drink might do his nerves wonders.

When they found the refreshments, Edward exclaimed, as one really should, “What a lovely offering of delights you have!”

“I cannot take credit for any of it,” Lord Torrington assured him. “This is all Lady Callum’s doing.”

Edward nodded in appreciation as the duke handed him a glass. “Should I ask what this is?”

“It is punch of one sort or another. All I can tell you is that it has fruit and a considerable quantity of spirits in it.” Lord Torrington raised his glass in a toast, causing Edward to return the gesture.

They drank the punch in unison. Edward blew out a breath. “That is a strong enough spirit to drive out the devil himself.”

“Hear, hear,” Lord Torrington said in merriment. “Still, it seems to have cured your ailment. Are you feeling better then?”

Edward nodded and laughed boldly. “I do feel better. Thank you, Your Grace.”

They fell into silence. It was odd to stand next to the man who would be one’s enemy yet he treated one as a friend. Perhaps that was because he had as of yet no knowledge of what treachery Edward was here upon.

To Edward's relief, Lord Grayson collected the duke for a card game. He waved off the duke's concerns about leaving him on his own and watched the duke finally go with Lord Grayson with a sigh of relief. He waited a respectful amount of time before he went to find Lady Callum.

He spied her as she was leaving a group of ladies. He joined her as she went into the side hallway. "Lady Callum," Edward said quickly, before she could disappear again.

She turned her sparkling hazel eyes towards him and Edward swore her face lit up. The notion of it warmed his blood and his heart. "Lord Hawley, I had wondered where you had got to."

"I was with Lord Torrington having some punch, but Lord Grayson stole him away to play cards." Lord Hawley smiled. He lowered his voice. "I was wondering if I could perhaps talk with you privately. It is a matter of urgency."

Her lips pushed out as if she were considering his words before nodding cautiously. "We can step into the library."

Hope buoyed Edward's spirit as she agreed to speak with him. Having her agree to a private conversation was by far the part that Edward had worried over the most. Now she had agreed, he only had to worry over her reaction to what he had to say.

They made their way in silence down the hallway to the library, where he held the door open for Lady Callum. He felt a little roguish, but he made sure as best he could that no one else was in the hallway. No matter the outcome, there was no need in ruining Lady Callum's reputation over a conversation.

Inside the library, Lady Callum waited for him with her hands clutched in front of her blue dress. "I do apologise for being so dramatic and pulling you away from the party, but I fear that if I do not act brashly then I may not have the chance to say what I need to say."

"And what is it that you need to say so urgently, Lord Hawley?" Lady Callum looked genuinely curious as she lifted a hand to pat her hair.

Edward looked at his feet for a moment trying to find the words that

would sway a woman's heart. Failing that he looked at her and sighed, "I admire you, Lady Callum."

"Thank you."

Edward shook his head. "I mean so much more than that, yet those are the words that fill me. I mean that I adore you. We are a good match, are we not?"

She stared at him for a long moment before she said softly, "Oh."

It was not the resounding declaration of mutual feelings that he had wanted, but she had not slapped him across his face. "I fear I might have made a fool of myself."

"No," Lady Callum assured him. "I am fond of you as well. Things are not all black and white. I fear that my heart is troubled."

Edward wanted to reach out to her. "I am sorry if I cause you any pain. I could not bear to remain silent. It is better that I look a fool than to never try to get you to cancel the engagement."

"I had some inkling that you might hold me in esteem. But I had no idea that you felt so fervently for me." She wrung her hands together. "I do not know what is the right thing to do."

Edward clasped his hands together as he prayed for her to listen. "If you have any doubts, I beg you to please cancel this engagement before it is official."

"Please, Lord Hawley, I want to be fair and truthful in all I do, and yet you put me in an awful spot." She looked at him pleadingly. "I do not know if I can be with someone I do not love. I thought I could manage it, but while I like you, I cannot say if that fondness is the beginning of love or not. I need time to think on this."

He let his hands fall to the side. "I understand that women need love and adoration. My heart is so full of the emotion for you. I simply thought that perhaps you would feel it too."

"Do not take me wrongly, Lord Hawley," Lady Callum said on a soft breath. "I need to tell you something. It must not, cannot leave this room. I just feel as though I must."

Edward looked at the radiant lady before him with something akin to alarm. “Whatever it is that you need to tell me, you can trust that I will never breathe a word of it to another soul. I would never betray you.”

Lady Callum looked down at the floor. She seemed to be collecting herself before she finally brought herself to look back at Edward. Her eyes were brimming with tears even as he saw her try to calm her nerves once again. “Lord Torrington and I are not what you think we are. We are not really a couple.”

Edward stared at her for a moment, his brain trying to rationalise what she had said. This wholesome, darling creature had lied to him and everyone else? “How did this come about?”

“It is a very long story. But when we first met Lord Torrington was in woe about his mother and her constant harassing about marriage. I was in fear that my brother would not allow me to make my own choices and would simply choose the first man who offered marriage.” She looked down as embarrassment coloured her cheeks. “We came up with a plan to help both of us escape our plights. We fostered this false engagement to allow me to make my own match and allow Lord Torrington to escape the season, as it were.”

Edward frowned. He would have spoken but the door to the library came open with such force that Edward winced. Lord Pentworth and Miss Durant came into the room as Lady Callum clutched her shawl about her shoulders, staring at the angry face of her brother.

“What is going on?” Harcourt demanded angrily.

“Harcourt, please keep your voice down,” Emmeline whispered urgently.

Harcourt’s hands were balled into fists and Emmeline knew he was too angry to reason with at the moment. But she had to try.

Harcourt growled, “How exactly did you think I would react to all of this?”

“You were not supposed to find out.” Emmeline spoke the simple truth. There was little else she could do. Her eyes went to Francesca.

She was sure that the woman's presence meant she had alerted Harcourt to where Emmeline was. "Lord Torrington and I were going to ask you to break the engagement off tonight before it was official. No one was to be the worse for it and I would have the rest of the season to find a good match."

He looked as though he really could not believe what he was hearing. He hissed, "Nash and you both made a fool of me. I'll wager you had a good laugh behind my back. Did it ever occur to you that I was happy for you?"

"Of course," Emmeline said with sad eyes. "I never wanted to hurt you and Lord Torrington certainly did not think of it causing you ill. We both care for you dearly."

Lord Hawley looked at everyone in turn. Harcourt rounded on him next, as if just noticing the man because he dared to move. "And you, Lord Hawley. You pull my sister in here to get her to break her engagement. That in and of itself is a lecherous thing to do."

"Can we all keep our voices down?" Emmeline was frantic to interject some calm into the situation. The last thing anyone needed was the whole party to become aware of what was going on in the library.

Francesca sneered at Emmeline from behind Harcourt. "There is little need for secrecy now. I followed you and overheard you tell your consort here that you would give his offer of marriage thought. I knew that I had to tell the earl and duke immediately." She laughed brightly. "I hate to say that was right, but it is clear that I was. I knew it was some sort of jest that you were wanted by all of these men. Look at you! There is no way you could have attracted them all with your beauty."

Lord Hawley and Harcourt came to Emmeline's defence, almost in unison.

"That is a step too far!"

"No one speaks to my sister like that!"

Emmeline raised her hand to silence the men as she stepped toward Francesca. The smaller woman seemed to rethink her callous words as Emmeline looked down at her. "I should have heeded my instincts earlier. You might want to look for new employment, Miss Durant."

“You think you will shame me by letting me go? If you do that then you might want to think about what the newspapers will say when I tell them of what has transpired here tonight. I earned my place,” Francesca drew herself up straight and turned to leave but faltered.

Standing between her and the door was Lord Torrington. Emmeline had never seen such a look on the man’s face before, and it frightened her. His voice was laced with such threat that Emmeline shivered. “Get out,” he growled to Francesca.

“I will have the butler escort her from of the building,” Harcourt said as he went to yank on the cord to summon Gerald. “We would not want her to get lost and accidentally mingle with the guests,”

Francesca looked at two the men. “Do you mean to threaten me?”

“We do not need to threaten you, Miss Durant.” Lord Torrington hooked a finger in his cravat and tugged it loose. “You know how these rumours go as well as we do. Why, with all the trouble Lady Callum and her brother have had with you, I doubt any other household in the area would associate with you.”

Francesca seethed. “You would tarnish my reputation?”

“We have not tarnished anything,” Emmeline said plainly. “You are the one who took advantage of our kindness and gratitude for your own agenda. Why would any other family want to be subjected to all of that?”

Gerald came in and looked over at Harcourt expectantly. If the butler thought there was anything odd about the scene in the library, then his face did not betray it. “You rang, Your Lordship?”

“Would you please escort, Miss Durant to her room to fetch her things? She will be going from there directly to a carriage outside. Do you understand?” Harcourt eyed Gerald meaningfully.

Gerald dipped his head forward. “Of course, Your Lordship.” He turned and opened the door. “This way, Miss Durant.”

If Emmeline did not know better she might have thought Gerald had a smile on his face as he closed the door behind himself and Miss Durant.

Harcourt looked to Lord Torrington. "I need the truth now, Nash. All of it."

"The truth is exactly what Lady Callum said," Lord Torrington said. He breathed in deeply as if giving himself a moment before he turned to Emmeline. "Or at least that is how it started."

Emmeline opened her mouth to speak but Lord Torrington raised a hand. "Please let me finish." Emmeline nodded her consent and Lord Torrington continued, "I tried to do things to show you that my feelings had changed. I wanted to see if perhaps you might actually be interested in being with me, but I never could pin down how you felt. You seemed so fond of Lord Hawley. I just want you to be happy."

Lord Hawley looked at Emmeline and she stared back at him. She knew the man was just as stunned by this new revelation as she was. Lord Hawley stammered, "I will not deny my own feelings in this matter. I have to be true to them, Lady Callum. My heart is set on you."

Emmeline looked between the two men and finally at her brother, who looked just as confused as anyone. This night and the days leading up to it had been such a turbulent affair, with her emotions going up and down at random times. She looked at Lord Hawley then back to Lord Torrington.

She said to Lord Torrington, "I tried hard to stick the plan. You were so clear that you wanted no attachments. You had no time for anything but business." Emmeline looked into the man's dark eyes and realised that her thoughts of him when she had first seen him and how other women might have been swayed by his deep voice and intense stare should have told her own fate. "I have loved you for a long while. I just tried not to admit it even when everything in me said it was right. I kept telling myself that we had so little in common."

"I will admit that I really did go into this with true intentions of doing just as I said," Lord Torrington assured her. "But my feelings are not something I can fight when you change everything I see. You are not like other ladies, Lady Callum. Your wit, intelligence, kindness and yes, even your Greek goddess stature." He reached out to her and Emmeline put her hands in his. "My weaknesses are your strengths and that is something so strangely fitting. We may not have much in common, but we do not need that. We complement each other."

Emmeline could scarcely breathe lest she wake up and this be just another dream taunting her waking self. She looked into his eyes, searching for some falsehood in his face. But all she saw was earnestness. In the end there really was nothing to think about and that too hurt her as her eyes went over to dear Lord Hawley.

She released Lord Torrington's hands and turned to the kind man that Lord Hawley had always shown himself to be. She prayed that he would once again show himself to be that man as she gathered her courage to speak. "Lord Hawley, I have grown so fond of your friendship. I hold it dear to me, but I must be true to my heart in this. Please do not hate me for it."

Lord Hawley's face watched her with a sadness that might have shattered Emmeline's heart if Lord Torrington had not come beside her and taken her hand in his. With a deep breath that seemed to steady him, Lord Hawley said reasonably, "I knew when I met you that your heart was with another. How can I hate you for something I already knew? My dear Lady Callum, I will not lie and say that I am not disappointed. But if you are happy, then I truly wish you the best."

Emmeline trembled with the relief of knowing she had not lost Lord Hawley's faithful friendship. "Do say that you will visit us often. We would like that very much, would we not, Lord Torrington?"

The smile on Lord Torrington's face spoke before he replied. "Of course we would. You are always welcome at our home, Lord Hawley. A good man is hard to find and from what Lady Callum has said about you, you appear to be one of the best."

"I am honoured, Your Grace," Lord Hawley said as he fumbled with his waistcoat as though he thought himself quite a mess. "I do not know quite what to say. You are a lucky man, Your Grace."

Emmeline ventured, "I do hope that this can all stay between us."

"Oh certainly," Lord Hawley assured her.

She could still see the look of sadness on his face and it made her heart ache. "You will find someone who loves you as you love her, Lord Hawley. Things will work out for the better, you will see."

“How can I doubt your words? You have always been wise and truthful in our times together and I must trust that you are correct now, even if I cannot see it for my own disappointment.” Lord Hawley gave both Emmeline and Lord Torrington a bow. “I wish you all the best. I truly mean that.”

Then the mild-mannered earl was gone, leaving Lord Torrington, Harcourt and Emmeline looking at one another.

Harcourt cleared his throat. “Now then. My turn.”

“Harcourt, surely you can understand?” Emmeline looked at her brother, her eyes pleading with his.

Harcourt sighed heavily and folded his arms across his chest. “I would like to understand, but this has left me in a horrible position. I do not wish to hurt your chances of a match, but Nash and you were simply out of line with all of this.”

“What I did, I did to help Lady Callum,” Lord Torrington protested. “Surely even you can see that.”

Harcourt huffed. “Am I to be the villain in this tale? I was going to wed her off and you swooped in to save her?”

“And you call me dramatic,” Emmeline groaned. “Off with it, Harcourt. Give us your permission.”

Harcourt looked between the two of them before throwing his hands in the air. “Fine, but on one condition.” He narrowed his eyes at Lord Torrington as he spoke. “The wedding must be arranged with haste. I shall not have any chance of someone ruining my sister’s reputation. Threatening Miss Durant will not long keep her silent, I assure you.”

“I shall go first thing in the morning and talk to the Archbishop to secure a special license.” Lord Torrington’s words surprised Emmeline and she turned her head toward him. He chuckled “Why do you look at me so? If you wish to have the banns read and wait weeks, then I shall simply obtain a common license.”

Emmeline shook her head. “Whatever you two think is best is fine. I simply wish to dance.”

“And dance you shall, with your brother’s permission, of course?”

Lord Torrington looked over at Harcourt as he held his arm out to Emmeline. She slipped her arm around him and leaned into the dark-haired duke. There was always this spicy smell around him that she had never quite allowed herself to indulge in lest it brought on unwanted feelings.

Harcourt waved them away as if dismissing naughty children, much to Emmeline's amusement.

Chapter 12

The music drifted out over the ballroom as Nash led Lady Callum onto the dance floor. He knew the announcement of their engagement would be very soon, but he wanted a dance first. With a smile he pulled her into a swirling waltz.

“I never understood why someone who danced so well did not like to dance,” Lady Callum admitted as she leaned into him, a bit too intimately, but Nash did not hold the display of affection against her.

For so long they had restrained themselves from showing much in the way of emotion that it was nice to freely display the affection that had built between them, even if it did cause some heads to turn. Nash put his arm around Lady Callum’s waist and indulged himself with finally finding out how the woman felt in his arms beyond the formality of dancing. She gave him a look of suspicion that was swiftly replaced with a smile of endearment.

“Dancing was something I had to learn in school. Like most subjects, one can be good at them and not actually enjoy what is being taught,” Nash replied as they danced around an elderly couple. Nash inclined his head to the aging duo, who were more than likely here for Harcourt as Nash did not know them.

Lady Callum lifted her fingers off of Nash’s hand and gave the elderly woman a wave. “Lovely to see you, Lady Henson!”

The woman bobbed her head and gave Lady Callum a serene smile before Nash led them away. “I do not know as many people here as I thought I would,” he admitted.

“Harcourt let me do the invitations,” Lady Callum said almost apologetically. “Many of these people are from the season or from Scotland. I let Harcourt invite his own friends and acquaintances, so there are some I do not know too.”

Nash leaned in and whispered, “Just wait until you see the party Mother is planning to throw in our honour.”

“You did not mention that.”

“We were not supposed to be still engaged, so I did not think it necessary to mention.”

Lady Callum laughed and tried her best to cover it by tucking her head against Nash’s shoulder, which probably caused more attention than the laughing would have. Nash laughed along with her.

After the dance Harcourt called for everyone’s attention before anyone could even move off the dance floor. Lady Callum gave Nash a look that was almost bashful.

“Tonight, I am filled with happiness to announce to all those gathered here the engagement of my sister, Lady Emmeline Callum, and Lord Torrington!” Harcourt raised his hand toward Nash and Lady Callum where they had stopped in the middle of the dance floor.

Nash was quite used to the attention, but he could tell that Lady Callum did not quite know where to look as the room applauded them. He felt a slap on his back as Lord Grayson came around to grasp his hand. “Well played, Lord Torrington. You have yourself a fine match in Lady Callum.”

“I could not agree more, Lord Grayson,” Nash replied.

Lady Callum bowed her head in embarrassment, but was soon enveloped in a small knot of ladies who tugged her away from Nash as they enthusiastically demanded to hear all about the announcement from Lady Callum herself. Nash shook his head and said to Lord Grayson, “I fear I have lost my betrothed before we can even begin our engagement properly.”

“Women have to be indulged in these things,” Lord Grayson said sagely. “Let us get a toast, shall we?”

Nash went along with him because he could use a stiff drink. After all was said and done, he still was being kept away from Lady Callum. He glanced over at her and found her looking back at him as well. He lifted his hand to her as he followed Lord Grayson.

Getting to the altar quickly seemed a very prudent idea to Nash in that moment. After all, if they married quickly then he would have to put up with this nonsense for less time. Dowager Randall came up to them as they made it to the refreshment table. “Lord Grayson, I see that you have managed to sequester Lord Torrington before the others could.”

“I have indeed,” Lord Grayson said with merriment. “How is your niece doing this season?”

Dowager Randall smiled in a demure way that Nash thought might have been a little disappointed. “She is making a fine first showing this year. But I fear she may not find a match the first time around.”

“I thought she had hit it off with that Lord Victor fellow,” Lord Grayson said with confusion.

Dowager Randall pursed her lips and folded her hands in front of her. “Yes, well. He seems to have flown the coop. There are even rumours that he got himself into some trouble and may have a knobstick wedding back home.”

Nash’s eyebrows rose in surprise at the Dowager’s words. “I did not take him for one of those.”

“Youth gets the best of people sometimes,” Lord Grayson said amicably. “As long as he does the honourable thing, it should work out fine. It is a shame that your niece’s debut was tarnished by it.”

Nash nodded at Lord Grayson’s words. “That is true. She seemed a lovely girl.”

“Your kind regards are appreciated, Your Grace. I warned her not to show too much deference to any one young man so early on, but as Lord Grayson says, youth gets the best of us all.” Dowager Randall shook her head and said, “But that is not at all that I came here to say. I wanted to give you my congratulations, Your Grace. Lady Callum is a wonderful woman and I think she suits you quite well.”

Nash dipped his head in acceptance. “Thank you, Dowager Randall.”

“I suppose I should collect my charge. I left her with Lady Callum and the other young ladies.” Dowager Randall gave them a subtle inclination of her head, as a woman of her age sometimes did, and she set off to find her wayward niece.

Lord Grayson whispered, “That woman could frighten a frazzled bear.”

Nash bit down on the laugh that fought to escape. Dowager Randall

seemed to evoke the same emotion in all men, it would seem. Her late husband must have been a formidable man. "Is she really so bad?"

"I once asked if she were related to the merchant family by the same name," Lord Grayson said. "I will never make that mistake again."

This time Nash did not try to staunch the flow of his laughter. "I have been tempted a time or two myself to ask about a connection. I am glad you made that mistake for both of us."

"Ah, I have you in my debt then," Lord Grayson replied.

Nash shrugged and accepted the debt that he now owed the card-loving lord. If you had to owe a debt to someone, Lord Grayson was not a bad sort. He was in too good a mood to argue the finer points.

Nash was grateful that at least for tonight he would not have to deal with his parents. This party was merely for Harcourt to announce the engagement to friends and family. He had not even given much thought to what the party his mother was planning was going to be like, as he had not expected it to actually take place.

Lord Grayson patted him on the back as he shoved a drink into his hand. "I say, the look on your face is most dire. Realising that engagements end in marriage, are you?"

"Do they?" Nash asked with feigned surprise. "No one said anything about that."

Lord Grayson slapped Nash's shoulder with a resounding thud in place of the gentle pats from earlier. Nash wondered if the man realised how hard he was hitting him, but he grinned and bore the man's clubbing as he drank his punch.

Several lords and ladies came by to give their enthusiastic congratulations and well wishes. The only issue Nash had was that every time someone new showed up, Lord Grayson insisted on a toast. As the hour wore on he thought that perhaps the man was a bit deep in his cups. Then again, perhaps Nash himself was a bit deep in his cups too.

Harcourt rescued him finally. As they made their escape, Harcourt whispered, "Wanted you to still be able to speak English and stand upright. It would not look good for Lord Torrington to be falling down

drunk at his own engagement party.”

“Well played,” Nash agreed as he could think of nothing else to say. Harcourt steered him toward a quiet corner and ordered a maid to bring them a pot of coffee.

Harcourt and Nash relaxed in overstuffed chairs and watched the bustling celebration go on around them. Lady Callum was still making the rounds of groups of ladies, her cheeks slightly pink.

Nash thanked the maid profusely when she brought the coffee pot and tray. Harcourt did not even try to hide the smirk on his face as the maid looked thoroughly confused as to why Nash was so grateful. After she left, Harcourt laughed. “It is a good thing that my staff are not prone to gossip.”

“I truly do like coffee, even if it is a bitter drink,” Nash replied, sipping the warm beverage to which he had added a good dollop of cream.

Harcourt’s face screwed up in disgust. “I doubt anything could be bitter with that much cream slathered into it.”

“From a man who takes his tea with no sugar, I do not take any insult from your words. You cannot judge what you do not understand.” Nash took another sip of his coffee and looked pointedly away from Harcourt.

Lady Callum appeared as if she had been waiting nearby to surprise them. Nash thought this entirely plausible as he could have sworn she was just across the room. Surely the woman had to be a magical creature. Perhaps that Greek goddess bit was not entirely without merit.

“What are you two doing cloistered over here?” She looked down upon them with a touch of judgment and a good dose of amusement.

Harcourt confided, “Your betrothed tried to drink the punch bowl dry.”

Nash protested, “I hardly had anything to do with it. It was Lord Grayson who kept filling my cup with endless toasts.”

“I am sure he had the best of intentions,” Lady Callum said in a

soothing tone. Nash had to admit that when she said the words, they sounded reasonable. He could forgive Lord Grayson, after all.

Harcourt grinned. "We shall have him sorted soon. A bit of the bitter will get him right back in his boots."

"My boots have never left my feet," Nash interjected as he pointedly raised his foot so they could see.

Lady Callum shook her head at him. "At least everyone else will soon be as festive as you, dear Lord Torrington, so I am sure you will not stand out. Cook has come to fill the punch bowl thrice now."

"I fear I might not have a home if this group gets topsy-turvy," Harcourt said, misgiving written on his face.

Nash grunted. "You should have thought about that when you served that punch."

"It is meant to be sipped, not downed by the bucket." Harcourt shook his head as he rose. "I shall tell the staff to cut back on the spirits in the punch, or I shall have patrons sleeping in their carriages."

Nash watched his friend hurry off as if he were going to prevent some great calamity. He cleared his throat and eyed the lady standing over him. She really was lovely. "Lady Callum, please sit with me while I recuperate."

Lady Callum inclined her head and accepted his offer. "I am quite sorry we got separated earlier. What a state it has left you in."

"Indeed," Nash agreed. "We should endeavour to make sure that we never part again."

"Lord Torrington, I do think that might be an impossible thing to manage even for a man of your stature. At least until we are wed."

"Then we shall be wed post-haste," he said reasonably. "Although I do think my mother will be put out if she does not get to throw her engagement party."

Lady Callum nodded. "It shall be quite odd to be around her now. Before I was so concerned with not hurting her feelings that I fear I might have given her the impression that I did not want to be around

her.”

“Then you are one of the family already,” Nash jested.

Lady Callum clicked her tongue. “That is quite horrible. I feel poorly for the woman now more than ever.”

“Oh, bother. That means my brother will have to come to London,” Nash said aloud when he had meant the thought for his own mind.

Her fingers brushed her hair out of her face as she raised an eyebrow at him, as if trying to discern his reason for alarm. “Is your brother an ogre?”

“No, not really.” He sighed. “He is just a little brother. They are as they are.”

“Ah, so a fellow younger sibling who is toiling in obscurity,” Lady Callum said with a smile. “I think I shall get along with him.”

Nash snorted. “You might think it, but be warned he is nothing like me.”

“So, you say,” she countered. “You also say that Harcourt and I are similar, while I do not see the resemblance at all.”

Giving up, Nash leaned back in his chair. “Have your misery then.”

After Lord Hawley had left Lady Callum and Lord Torrington in the library, he wandered around the halls in a daze. Despite his bitter disappointment, perhaps there was truth in Lady Callum’s words. As much as he admired her, he could see that perhaps it was not love but simply an adoration of her differences that he so was drawn to. Certainly, she was unlike most ladies he had met.

He collected himself a cup of punch and made his way around the dance floor. From here he could see Lord Torrington and Lady Callum dancing. The more he watched them, the more certain he was that the two of them were good for each other.

The fact that the match Lady Callum had chosen was a good one did little to soothe his heart. He took a sip of the punch and was surprised

by the bite of alcohol. He shook his head and breathed deeply to ease the burning of it down his throat. "I do say that is not a drink fit for the ladies," Edward breathed out.

A grey-haired man near him chuckled. "My Missus rather likes it. It is an old family recipe."

"Are you related to Lady Callum then?" Edward was deeply curious as he held out his hand to the stranger.

He took Edward's hand and pumped it up and down in a fierce handshake. "Aye, she is related to me clan." The thick accent gave away the man's ancestry long before his words.

"Pleasure to meet you then," Edward said as he forgave the man's impetuosity of striking up a conversation. If Lady Callum were any indication, the rules of introductions and etiquette were far looser in the Scotland society. "Lord Hawley, Earl of Granton," Edward filled in.

The man grinned broadly. "Pleasure to be meeting you, Lord Hawley. I am Lord Dorsey, of the McKinnon Clan."

"Cannot say that I am well acquainted with your clansmen, but it is a great thing to meet family of Lady Callum's. She is a splendid young lady from my time in her acquaintance," Edward said as he finally got his hand back from the joyful Scotsman.

Lord Dorsey slapped Edward on the back. "Good on ye, Lord Hawley. We knew that our lass would do well in London, even if she had her doubts."

"Ye leave that poor man alone, Douglas," a plump woman in a vibrant gown of greens and reds said as she joined them.

Lord Dorsey snatched the woman around the waist and yanked her into him. "This is my Missus, Lord Hawley." He spoke to his wife in an affectionate tone. "I was just telling this fine lord about ye, Maggie."

"I dannae know what Douglas has said, but I wager it is all a lie," Maggie said with a shake of her head.

Edward found the couple rather entertaining as they were soon lost in an argument, forgetting he existed. He would normally be offended, but the argument appeared to be their normal mode of conversation.

He bid them a good night when he got the chance and slipped away.

In his haste to escape the couple he inadvertently bumped into someone. He apologised out of habit before he noticed it was a young lady. Her dark hair was set against pale skin with striking blue eyes. For a moment he forgot himself before he blundered, "Forgive me for not paying better attention to my surroundings." He had not been formally introduced to her and so he merely ducked his head and was soon past the striking young lady.

It was at that moment that Lord Pentworth called for everyone to attend him as he announced the engagement of Lord Torrington and Lady Callum. He joined in the round of applause despite his still bruised heart. Soon people were flocking to give the couple their wishes of good luck and happiness.

Edward knew that he really should add his own well wishes, but had he not already done so? Did he really need to do so publicly? He sighed and made his way to the throng of young ladies that held Lady Callum hostage.

Halfway to his destination he reconsidered his endeavour and went to find Lord Torrington instead. He was with Lord Grayson holding court near the refreshment table. Edward would have come forward right then, but Dowager Randall came to speak to them.

Edward hung back so he could avoid the dowager and found that the opportunity for a private word with the duke passed swiftly as others crowded around. As it was, he was relegated to standing *en masse* with several other men and toasting the duke's future happiness. Still that counted, and Edward left the group feeling that he had done his part.

As he was making his way toward the outer hallway, a voice stopped his progress. "Lord Hawley, a word if you do not mind?"

He turned to see Lady Callum bustling toward him now free of her well wishers. His heart squeezed uncomfortably at the smile on her face. "Lady Callum, is something the matter?"

"Not at all," she assured him. It was then that he noticed she was not alone. She held onto the hand of a young lady who was half hidden behind her. "Darla, come out from there," Lady Callum chided. When the young lady consented, Lord Hawley recognised her as the young lady he had bumped into earlier. "Lord Hawley," Lady Callum said

with great ceremony. “I would like to introduce you to Lady Anderson. Lady Anderson, this is Lord Hawley, Lord Hawley.”

With her introduction made, Lady Callum took a step back to give Lady Anderson the full spotlight. Lady Anderson’s cheeks flamed pink as she dipped into a curtsy. “I am pleased to meet you, Lord Hawley.”

“It is an honour to meet a friend of Lady Callum,” Lord Hawley said, inclining his head to the young lady respectfully. Lady Callum gave him a meaningful look and Lord Hawley eyed her with confusion before looking back at Lady Anderson.

Lady Callum said, “Lady Anderson’s father works for the Royal Navy, does he not?”

“He does, Your Ladyship,” Lady Anderson said with nod. She and Lady Callum exchanged a look before the young lady continued, “Lady Callum tells me that you own a shipping supply company?”

Edward smiled. “Yes, I do. What does your father do for the navy?”

“Oh, he is a ship-builder.”

Lady Callum dipped her head as if taking her leave before she swiftly disappeared. Edward did not know what to say. He assumed Lady Anderson’s chaperone was around somewhere, but he felt a bit of a rogue talking to the lady alone.

Edward apologised. “Forgive me. I feel as though I should ask permission to speak with you from your guardian.”

Lady Anderson’s face dipped into a frown. “I suppose.”

“Is there an issue?” Edward did not think Lady Callum would have put either himself or Lady Anderson into an awkward position.

Lady Anderson wrung her hands together before she said softly, “It is just that most men seem to be put off by Aunt Myrtle.”

“I do not know that I am acquainted with her.”

Lady Callum suddenly re-appeared and, to Edward’s horror, beside her was Dowager Randall. “Lord Hawley, forgive me for leaving so

abruptly earlier. I would like to introduce Lady Anderson's aunt, Dowager Randall."

Edward's mind put together the word aunt and Dowager Randall, but he simply did not want to accept that the sweet Lady Anderson's guardian was the old badger of a woman he saw before him. "I see," Edward managed before he shook his head. "I mean, Dowager Randall, it is lovely to see you."

"Lord Hawley," Dowager Randall said, as though she had held him up to examination and found him not up to snuff. "You have met my niece, I see."

Edward looked at Lady Anderson, who looked very much like she wanted to disappear. "I have had the honour of making her acquaintance by Lady Callum's good grace, yes."

Dowager Randall narrowed her eyes at him. "Do be aware that I am responsible for her and will not put up with any shenanigans, such as that Lord Victor has visited upon us."

"I assure you that my intentions are pure, Dowager Randall." Edward had met the woman on occasion, but liked best to avoid her. Whereas most introductions were an invitation to get to know people better, he had always thought of his introduction to Dowager Randall as a warning that he should pass on to others. His mind could not quite understand how Lady Anderson and Dowager Randall were related, as he could see no similarity between them.

Lady Callum smiled. "Lord Hawley is a wholly endearing man and a good friend of myself and the duke."

Dowager Randall seemed to soften at her warm words. Lady Anderson spoke up, to Edward's surprise. "I was just telling him about Father, Aunt Myrtle."

"Rightly so. Your father is a strong bull of a man, and what you should hold as a standard," Dowager Randall said as her eyes went back to Edward. They held a critical look that said she did not think much of his match with her niece.

Why the fact that Dowager Randall's opinion bothered him at all was a wonder to Edward. He thought that perhaps his avoidance of the woman had left her thinking of him as more a frightened rabbit than

merely a man who did not fancy annoyances. Lady Anderson did not seem to take her aunt's words as harshly as they seemed to Edward.

"Lord Hawley owns a shipping supply." It was Lady Callum nudging the conversation back onto Edward and away from Lady Anderson's father.

Edward nodded. "Yes, I supply most of the fleets that work out of London."

"That sounds profitable," Dowager Randall said with an expression that Edward eventually saw was meant to be a smile. The woman must have been so unused to smiling that the expression was more of a grimace than anything pleasing.

Lady Anderson too offered Edward a smile. They spoke only for a few moments more, before Dowager Randall insisted that Lady Anderson go pay her respects to the duke personally. Edward watched the two women go with puzzlement.

"There then, that was not so bad," Lady Callum said, as though she were exhausted by some great effort.

Edward looked at the woman who was his friend. He shook his head at her. "What was the idea of that? Are you trying to do me in?"

"I just wanted you to see that, despite her relation to the dreaded Dowager Randall, Lady Anderson is a darling young lady. If given time to show her personality, I think you shall find her quite lovely." Lady Callum gave him a pleased smile. She added in a whisper, "Besides, she told me that you bumped into her and she was curious about you."

Edward's face felt warm from Lady Callum's words. He must have made a sight because Lady Callum hid her amusement behind her fan. "Have a wonderful time at the party, Lord Hawley."

The house was a disaster. No one had told her how much a party tormented the household where the party was held. She regretted very much every flower petal as she pitched in to help the staff tidy up.

Jasmine giggled as she plucked a wilted rose petal off Emmeline's

dress. "I think you are turning into a flower, Miss."

"And apparently I am dying for want of water." Emmeline dusted her hands off on the faded muslin dress she had chosen to wear specifically for its age. "I am glad that I decided to pack a few old things. I would hate to think of getting any of my new dresses dirty."

Jasmine bent down to scoop up some more broken stems that had fallen out of a vase. "I think this one is broken."

"That's the third one," Emmeline complained. "I shall have to talk to Harcourt about never serving that punch again. I would wager half of our guests are sick in their beds this morning."

Cook tutted. "That recipe has been passed down for generations."

"And it should come with a warning on it. It would not hurt to cut back on the bite of it."

With a nod, Cook agreed, "Probably couldn't hurt. I never understood why there was so much in it."

"I should like to see that recipe some time," Emmeline said, taking shards of vase from Jasmine with dismay.

Jasmine warned Cook, "She might want to burn it. Best hide it."

Emmeline did not even have the energy to protest the statement. Never mind that it was likely true. Burning the thing would save future generations from this misery. Luckily, Emmeline had not imbibed as much of the drink as other partygoers.

"I wonder how the duke is feeling. He drank a good slug of that punch." She frowned as she carried her armful of refuse to where they were dividing it up between what could be put out to rot, burn or re-used.

Cook followed Emmeline into the kitchen. "I wager he is fine. He is a good-sized man, so he is likely to just have a bit of a headache. I have to check my stew."

"It certainly smells good. I am quite hungry after working all morning," Emmeline exclaimed, stepping through the door from the kitchen to the garden.

Jasmine nodded enthusiastically as she followed along behind her. "I'm rather looking forward to teatime myself."

They worked alongside each other amicably. "I almost expected your Caeley to appear when I heard that some of your far-flung Scottish relatives were coming to the party."

"I would never hear of subjecting Caeley to a journey here just for a party. I sent her a letter beforehand, so she would be the first to know." Emmeline shrugged as she dusted her hands off yet again. It was a hopeless gesture as the grime seemed to be part of her now. "Truthfully, some of the relatives I had to invite are only so in name. I barely recall them. But tradition says they should be invited."

Jasmine twisted her hair up and slipped the pins into it. "My hair is giving me fits today."

"It is all this bending," Emmeline grumbled.

Cook called from the kitchen, "You two sound like a pair of clucking hens fussing at your corn. Come get your tea!"

Emmeline needed no further invitation. They were swiftly back into the kitchen. "Wash up then," Cook said indulgently as she waved them over to the big sink that housed a bowl of water.

They washed quickly, even as they played and pushed. Cook shook her head at the antics. "You act like children. I thought you were tired."

"The smell of your biscuits has given us energy," Emmeline explained, taking an eager seat at the kitchen table where the staff ate.

Cook placed a tray of tea and biscuits in front of them. "Now do behave yourselves and set a good example for the other young ladies."

"It is so odd to remind myself that others look to me," Jasmine said in conspiracy.

Emmeline grinned broadly as she nabbed herself a biscuit. "I know that feeling. I never felt like I was someone who had to be above reproach at home. So, when my mother would tell me to set an example, I really had no idea how I was supposed to do that."

Jasmine sighed as she picked up the teapot. She poured herself and Emmeline a cup of tea as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. "I got called Miss today, and I found it so foreign that I honestly did not even think they were speaking to me."

"Well, it is customary for your position," Emmeline ventured.

With a snort, Jasmine agreed, "Sure, but I never used to be called that when Miss Durant was here."

"I think a lot of things will change. People see you differently now that you are stood all by your lonesome as my lady's maid." Emmeline put some sugar into her tea as she nibbled her biscuit with its nutty warm flavour. "Besides, you deserve it. You took charge of cleaning up today rather well. I think you might even be suited to the role of housekeeper."

Jasmine scoffed as she picked up her teacup. "I wouldn't go so far as that."

"Where do you see yourself in the future?" Emmeline was genuinely curious. As helpful as Jasmine had been to her over her months in London, she had not heard the woman express any true desire of her own.

As if she needed a moment to think, Jasmine took a long sip of her tea. When she lowered the cup, she said softly, "I honestly have kept myself from thinking too far ahead. My mother said that ambition can spoil a person, and seeing how it turned Miss Durant into such a beast, I dare say I want nothing."

"It is a wonder to have a dream, Jasmine. I think everyone is owed at least one good dream in a lifetime." Emmeline rocked back in the wooden chair and stretched her sore legs. "So, tell me a dream."

"To be straightforward, Miss, I never even dreamed that I would be a lady's maid. It is quite a thing for a maid such as me to attain a position as this. I am quite content where I am."

It was a fair answer. The position of lady's maid was generally sought after, ranked only by the housekeeper within the female staff. Emmeline inclined her head in acknowledgement of the girl's words.

Jasmine tapped her teacup as if in thought. "Were you serious about your inclination to have me stay on as your lady's maid?"

"Certainly," Emmeline said plainly. "I would not have mentioned it otherwise. Despite what my brother might think, I do not generally do things willy-nilly."

Jasmine giggled. "I think that His Lordship views anything as reckless. Do you think he will take a bride now that you are well on your way to the altar?"

"Oh, that's a scandalous question," Cook scolded.

Emmeline laughed and ignored the cook's scolding words to show Jasmine she should too. "I think if my brother does not find a lady then I shall be forced to aid him."

Chapter 13

The engagement party for his family was as swollen and over the top an affair as he had expected it to be. Lady Callum seemed befuddled by the sheer number of people that Nash's family knew. He was grateful that the guest list had some crossover with the people with whom Lady Callum was acquainted.

He noted she seemed quite content to stay on his arm, not that he minded one bit. Nash rather enjoyed having her by his side. "There is Lord Hawley," he whispered as they left one group of well wishers and headed toward another.

"I do hope that he will overcome his fear of Dowager Randall enough to see that Lady Anderson is worth the trouble." Lady Cal... *Emmeline*, Nash corrected himself mentally, shook her head with a sigh. He found it odd to think the name let alone use it, even if he had been given permission to do so.

Nash shrugged and felt her tense, as though she thought he were trying to escape. He chuckled and put his hand on top of her arm. "Relax, these people are friends, not something to be feared."

"Then why are there so many of them?" Emmeline looked around nervously. "Did Lord Hawley go to Lady Anderson's group?"

Nash eyed his betrothed with an indulgent smile. She was so concerned about their good Lord Hawley that he found it endearing. Other men might have been jealous of the amount of energy she put into keeping track of another man. But Nash knew she was merely looking out for a friend.

He scanned around and swiftly found Lord Hawley safely ensconced in the table where Lord Grayson was holding court. "He is at the cards," Nash commented, and waited for the tide of her indignation.

Sure enough Emmeline hissed with fury. "Does he not see that they would be perfect together?"

"They have said a few sentences to each other, Beloved." Nash was careful to add the endearment behind his words to ward against her turning her ire on him.

Emmeline frowned at him momentarily before she softened and sighed. "Perhaps you are right. I cannot make them see what I see, after all."

"True words. Now, shall you allow me to escort you to the dance floor?" He gave her a grin, which she returned with a nod of her head.

Nash certainly hoped that the errant Lord Hawley screwed up enough courage to speak to Lady Anderson, or he might not deter Emmeline from wringing the man's neck for his stupidity. Still, he had other things to think of, and one was the lady on his arm. The feel of her as they danced put his mind squarely back on her as she smiled at him.

They danced for as long as they were able, but the need for rest and something to drink necessitated that they leave the safety of the dance floor. No sooner did they have their drinks in hand than Nash's mother appeared. She had left them to be as she played hostess, but Nash had known it would not last.

"Mother," Nash said, putting a smile firmly on his face.

Emmeline did not seem to have to force her smile and he had to ask her how she did that. His mother was a formidable woman, and usually one who left men quaking beneath the pressure of her stare. His mother and Dowager Randall would have been a pair to be reckoned with.

With a look of utter awe, Emmeline told Nash's mother, "Lady Sutton, you have outdone yourself. I scarcely know where to look. Everything is so beautiful."

"You are too kind," his mother said, but Nash could see that she thoroughly agreed with Emmeline's assessment. "I was just coming to ask how you two were enjoying the party, so I am gratified to find you both in good spirits. After all, this a part to celebrate your union."

Nash thought about the union to take his mind off the fact that he still had hours of this party left. He had already ridden to see the Archbishop and had been granted a special license. Of course, his mother insisted they wait until after all the parties were given and letters received, within reason.

"Nash, did you hear what I said?"

Nash blinked. His mother was looking at him with that particular look of hers that said he was in trouble. Emmeline had a faintly amused smile on her face. "Sorry, mind must have wandered off. I have all these shipping contracts to delegate."

"Men," she muttered. "His father is the same. I hope you have better luck dealing with that family trait than I have."

Emmeline giggled. "Oh, I think it will be fine, Your Ladyship."

Nash eyed his mother as the woman smiled, a true smile, at Emmeline. She seemed to have taken a liking to Emmeline, which Nash though was a good thing, but the fact that Emmeline genuinely did not seem to loathe his mother baffled him. Emmeline was truly a jewel among women.

The night dragged on and Nash swore that the clock chimed every hour twice. Emmeline jested with him, "You look so miserable that I am tempted to set you free to see if it makes you happy again."

"Do not dare," Nash said sternly. "I am only surviving this because of your presence. If you leave, I would likely drown."

That was the moment that his young brother chose to arrive, forever and probably terminally late. He burst into the ballroom with all the showmanship of a theatre-type with too much drink in him.

"Is that your brother?"

"Yes," Nash said with a sigh. "I am shocked that Mother allowed him to come to the party. She treats him like he is still in his loose clothing, fit only for the garden."

He came over to them with a big grin on his face. "Brother!" Nash found himself enveloped in a hug, which he returned with a laugh. "I forgot how tall you were. And this must be the lady of the hour?"

Nash nodded as he waved his hand over to his brother. "Emmeline, this is my brother Sir Ian Torrington. Ian, this is Lady Emmeline Callum."

"Lady Callum, it is a considerable surprise and pleasure to meet you," he said grandly.

Nash rolled his eyes at the dramatic bow his brother performed. Emmeline seemed charmed by it and regarded Master Ian the way one would a particularly pleasant youth. Nash supposed that he was a child in most senses, being still only fourteen and not yet ready to embark upon his life outside the home.

Emmeline asked, "Why is it that you greet me with surprise?"

Master Ian clasped his hands behind his back and looked pleased that she had asked. "Certainly because I never wagered that this one would settle down. He seemed rather determined not to."

Nash cleared his throat. "How goes school?"

"Good," he said with a broad grin. "I should not want to bore the lady with the details, as I am sure she is not interested in boarding school."

Nash told Emmeline, "He is attending the same school that your brother and I both attended."

"That is lovely. I have heard it is a very good school."

Master Ian looked around and whispered, "Mother has not yet spotted me. Do you think I have time to steal some biscuits before she sends me to my room?"

"If you hurry," Nash whispered. Master Ian took off toward the refreshments as discreetly and yet as quickly as he could.

Emmeline hid a laugh behind her hand. "He is quite precocious. I dare say that he probably is a lot like his older brother was in school, if I recall the stories from my brother."

"And yet another member of your family holds childhood pranks against me," Nash said with amusement. "I am hopeful that he will settle into his duties."

Emmeline enquired, "Like yourself?"

"Certainly," Nash acknowledged. "I have never shirked my duties. I was simply not overly fond of getting married on other people's agendas."

Lord Hawley adjusted his waistcoat for the thousandth time. He swallowed hard and walked to the Dowager Randall and her niece, who were standing to one side of the dance floor sipping mulled wine. As he approached, their eyes came around to greet him and he put on a smile.

“Good evening Dowager Randall, Lady Anderson.” He felt as though his throat were going dry, but he tried his best to breathe normally.

Dowager Randall pressed her lips flat, as though she were a hungry vulture and he a tasty morsel. Edward straightened his shoulders. “I was wondering if Lady Anderson would be inclined to dance.”

“That sounds lovely. Does that not, Aunt Myrtle?” Lady Anderson raised her eyebrows slightly, face hopeful as she eyed her aunt.

Dowager Randall conceded with a sigh. “It sounds acceptable, if you are willing.”

“Thank you, Aunt Myrtle,” Lady Anderson said.

Edward held out his hand before looking at the dowager. “Thank you, Dowager Randall. I promise to take good care of her.”

They slipped out onto the floor with the other couples and Edward breathed a sigh of relief.

“She scares you, does she not?”

Edward hated to admit to something so weak, but it also seemed silly not to acknowledge something just because of ego. “She does indeed put me in a mind of a very hungry wild animal that would like to gnaw upon my bones.”

Lady Anderson laughed and failed at hiding it behind her fan. Her laughter released the last bit of tension in Edward and he relaxed into the dance with her. “You know, my father has been looking for a new supplier for various things. You really should send him a letter and introduce yourself. Perhaps your acquaintanceship with myself could be of use.”

“That is really not necessary for you to vouch for me,” Edward assured

her, but added, "It is lovely that you would consider it."

Lady Anderson gave him a smile. "What is it that you fill your time with other than work, Lord Hawley?"

"Oh, I like a spot of fishing," Edward admitted freely. "Also I like to garden and torment the cook with my own creations at times."

The look on Lady Anderson's face was worth the venture. "I adore fishing. Most ladies do not like it as it gets your hands very dirty. But I find it relaxing."

"It is indeed quite a splendid sport if you need a quiet moment to reflect. My father used to take me down to the port and we would fish for hours." Edward smiled as he thought on the memory fondly.

Lady Anderson nodded. "My father as well. He used to set me up with a pole and bait to entertain me while he worked at the shipyard."

"We are a fine pair, then."

The dance had slowed and he could not believe that it had come to an end already. He lingered a bit in the dance before he led Lady Anderson off the dance floor. He asked hopefully, "Would you like a refreshment?"

"Thank you, that would be lovely."

Edward was eager to not let Lady Anderson get away from him. Yet he wanted to be honourable. He fetched her drink. As she took it he said quietly, "The dance seemed so short that I feel almost cheated of your presence."

Lady Anderson smiled, but there was a shadow behind that smile. It only lasted for a second but Edward had seen it. "Did I say something amiss?"

"No," Lady Anderson said quickly, fidgeting with the cup in her hands. "It is just that it reminded me of another man who said something similar."

Edward's heart plummeted. He could not bear to hear that her heart too belonged to someone else. It was a cruelty that he could not even imagine. "I did not know you were bound to another."

"I am not," Lady Anderson replied, shaking her head. She looked down at her cup. "Lord Victor is no longer at the season. There was a scandal with another lady and his family pulled him home."

Edward remembered vaguely hearing about something like that. Dowager Randall's words made sense to him then. "That is a terrible thing to happen. I am sorry that your first outing into society garnered such sorrow for you."

"You are such a kind man. I am wrong to lay these worries upon you. They are not yours to hold." Lady Anderson sighed. "I asked Lady Callum to introduce us because of how you apologised to me. You were so gentle."

Edward would have given anything to embrace the woman, but that was beyond his reach. He settled for simply saying, "I am glad that she introduced us. Lady Callum is a dear friend of mine, and I knew that if she thought highly of you that you must be something special."

"I do not know what to say." Lady Anderson's cheeks had gone quite pink.

Edward cursed himself for embarrassing the lady. "I did not mean to cause you grief."

"No, no, do not apologise. It was sweet of you to say that." Lady Anderson opened her mouth but closed it tightly again as her aunt joined them. "Aunt Myrtle, we were just getting something cool to drink after our dance."

Edward smiled. "Would you like a drink as well, Dowager Randall?"

The woman looked at Edward puzzled for a moment before she nodded. "Thank you."

Edward fetched the woman a drink and told her, "Think nothing of it. I was having such a wonderful time talking with Lady Anderson that I feared I had lost track of time. I would never want to endanger her reputation."

Dowager Randall considered him before she took a sip of the drink. "You seem a sincere man, Lord Hawley, and we do not mean to seem cold."

"I understand. Lady Anderson explained a bit and I had heard some of the rumours, although I had not put it together as to who the young man was until now." Lord Hawley frowned. "I do hope that it does not sour you against letting anyone court your niece this season."

Dowager Randall leaned her head to the side. "Are you suggesting that you might be interested in courting my niece?"

Edward needed no time to think over it. "I fail to see a reason to postpone what seems a perfectly obvious thing. We have much in common and are well matched socially."

Lady Anderson hid a smile behind her cup as her aunt considered Edward's bold words. He was determined to go straight for what he wanted this time. There was no reason to be coy.

Dowager Randall finally nodded. "I shall speak with her father on the matter. I suppose you will send him a formal letter?"

"That was my intent, yes. But I wanted to make sure that I told you how I felt since you were deeply affected by what happened with Lord Victor as well, Dowager Randall." Edward looked at the woman with a sympathetic smile. "If I need to earn your trust, then I am willing to do what needs to be done."

To his surprise Dowager Randall returned his smile. "I think you have already done that. So long as you remain a man of your word, then you shall find me most cordial, Lord Hawley." She looked over at her niece. "I assume that you are amicable to this?"

"Yes," Lady Anderson said with a hopeful smile. "I do hope Father will be. He almost made me come home after that situation with Lord Victor."

Dowager Randall patted her niece on the arm. "Think not on that scoundrel. You did nothing wrong and your reputation should not have to suffer for something he did apart from you."

"Does this mean that we can have another dance?"

"Do not go too far," Dowager Randall said with a dry chuckle. "Your courtship needs to be approved before you can dance together too often without causing a stir. Even Lord Hawley here is not immune to

that.”

Edward acknowledged that with a nod of his head. “There was a rumour about Lady Callum and myself before tonight, even if it was not founded. I would not want to give your father any reason to side against me.”

“We should go and give our congratulations to Lady Callum,” Dowager Randall said pointedly.

Lady Anderson sighed. “I already did that at the last party.”

“You have to do it at every party.” Dowager Randall guided her charge away.

It was quite surprising how things could turn out. He did not come here tonight thinking he would be leaving with a prospective betrothal, yet here he was. Edward did not know what to do with himself. He and Lady Anderson meshed so well that there was little reason to delay. With the season halfway over, there was very good reason to get a match set if he saw promise in it.

Weddings were things of beauty and joy, or so Emmeline thought. She had been fitted for dresses until she thought she would scream. The season was nothing to the nightmare of a wedding. To think that girls are led to believe that all their worries go away as soon as they have a man who is willing to marry them.

Truth be told, Emmeline had seen less of Lord Torrington after their betrothal became official than before the engagement party. When she did see him, she clung to him as if he might vanish. Although it amused him, it reminded her of how her mother used to always reprimand people for overt signs of affection.

Emmeline tried to remind herself that Lord Torrington’s name was Nash. He reminded her to call him that in private, but she was so used to addressing him formally. She had heard Harcourt call him by his given name for eons, but she still called him Lord Torrington.

She sat in her room day-dreaming that the wedding was over and she was home. That was the moment she stopped short. Emmeline cursed herself for forgetting. “I have not talked to Nash about the

arrangements after the wedding.”

“What was that?” Jasmine looked up from where she was busily packing suitcases for after the wedding.

Emmeline put her hands over her face. “I have been so busy getting ready for this accursed wedding that I forgot to talk to Lord Torrington about what happens after the wedding as far as living arrangements.”

“Oh, you mean, Scotland,” Jasmine said as she finally seemed to catch up to Emmeline’s train of thought.

Emmeline was beside herself with worry suddenly. She had not mentioned it. All Lord Torrington’s mother talked of was their home being her home, but she had a home.

“Do you not think that His Grace is aware you wish to return to Scotland?” Another suitcase filled, Jasmine dragged it over and set it with the others before turning back to Emmeline.

To tell the truth Emmeline did not know. “I have been so caught up in the feelings for the man, that he may have taken it to mean that I would like to stay here in London.”

“It is a long way for a married couple to be parted,” Jasmine agreed. “Although it is certainly not unheard of.”

Emmeline did not know if Nash would be amenable to that or not. He had business here in London. He had family here in London. “How could I forget it?”

“Love does odd things to a person, Miss. Do not hold yourself above it.” Jasmine gathered up another armful of dresses and started on the last suitcase. “You might have to leave some of these dresses to be sent to you later.”

Emmeline looked at the stack of dresses. “I know that we are not the same size, but any you would like to take and alter you can. I especially approve of the ones that Miss Durant had sewn.”

Jasmine laughed. “I do not think that they would be very practical for my duties. Besides, you might need them.”

“Speaking of Miss Durant makes me hope that she leaves us be.” Emmeline despised even saying the woman’s name, lest it summon her like some spirit.

Jasmine shook her head as she folded a dress crisply. “I should think that she would want to maintain what reputation she has.”

“I should think so, but she does strike me as a little vindictive. Perhaps her selfishness will prove helpful and she will seek to protect what she has.” Emmeline sighed as she heard footsteps coming up the hallway. “That will be Gerald.”

“Do not look so gloomy, Miss. It is nearly time for your wedding. It is meant to be a happy thing, in case you were unaware.”

“Oh, now she is a jester,” Emmeline retorted with laughter.

Gerald’s stern voice called out as he rapped on the door. “The carriage will be waiting when you get to the steps, ladies!”

“Thank you, Gerald!” Emmeline called back. She took a deep breath and had a look at herself. There would be nowhere to change once they arrived, so she had been forced to put her gown on ahead of time.

“I do hope it doesn’t rain.” Jasmine worriedly looked out the window.

Emmeline sighed. “Do not say that.”

“Well, if it does rain then that is a good omen.”

Emmeline rolled her eyes. “How is it good to be drenched on your wedding day?”

“Because when you tie a knot in a wet rope, the knot is stronger.” Jasmine was swiftly beside Emmeline as she took her role of lady’s maid quite seriously. She herded Emmeline out of the door as she picked up various things along the way they would need.

At the bottom of the stairs Emmeline stepped out into the entrance hall. Harcourt whistled. “What a sigh to see!”

“Keep it to yourself.” Emmeline smoothed the lace that lay over her satin gown.

Harcourt clicked his tongue. "You should be happy."

"It is hard to feel happy when I feel ill. I swear that I did not sleep a wink all night." Emmeline took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Harcourt said to Jasmine, "If she faints, you get her feet and I will grab her shoulders."

"You are not humorous, Harcourt." Emmeline shifted and pondered taking her shoes off, but then she probably would not get them back on before they were in the church.

Despite Nash's assertions that he would rather get married outdoors, common sense had prevailed as his mother proposed it would be easier to manage an indoor wedding. Of course, an indoor wedding meant less guests, and Emmeline was all for that.

Harcourt chuckled. "Come on then, let us get this mare hitched up." He was swiftly out the door, not waiting for the ladies.

Emmeline called, "You might not make it to the church in one piece, Brother!"

"Oh dear," Jasmine sighed as she ushered Emmeline out of the side door, helping to hold her skirt up out of the dirt.

The ride to the church was at least a quiet one, as Harcourt seemed to have finally come to his senses or realised that he needed to preserve his health. Emmeline peered out of the window looking up at the clouds. They were thick, but not overly dark. She had seen it rain when there was nary a cloud in the sky, so perhaps that did not mean much. Lord knew it rained enough in London for the whole of the world. Why this city was so greedy was beyond Emmeline.

To make matters worse, her hair refused to settle and determined to stand on end or escape the pins that Jasmine had spent almost an hour placing. Emmeline sought to hold her hair to task through sheer will. Unfortunately, will was in short supply as her mind darted everywhere at once.

They called the sensation cold feet, apparently. But Emmeline had cold everything. That could have had something to do with the damp in the air, but she reckoned it was fate drawing in on her. She had

been too cocky in her adoration of the duke and something had to give.

As she stepped out of the carriage at the church, she was ushered into a small room to the side so that the groom did not see her. Harcourt bid her farewell to take his place beside Nash as his best man. Jasmine would be serving as Emmeline's maid-of-honour. She was the closest friend that Emmeline had here in London and, despite Jasmine's misgivings, there could be no better choice.

"That is your cue," Jasmine said urgently, bringing Emmeline back to her senses.

Emmeline turned and went to the door that led into the main church. Jasmine gave her a big smile before she went first through the door. Emmeline counted in her head and then stepped out in time with the music that was playing.

She walked behind the last pew and turned up the aisle. It was then that her eyes landed on Nash. The Duke of Torrington stood waiting for her. The cut of him in his coat made her heart beat a bit faster. His long dark hair was worn loose.

Emmeline felt as though her insides were melting as she looked into his eyes. She cared not for the guests, only for the man who waited for her in front of the altar. It was perfect, but then it would have been perfect even in a field of weeds. Nash being there made it perfect.

How she walked to the altar she would never remember. The next moment, Nash was helping her onto the raised platform to stand with him. There were vows and promises, things to recite, but those were just words. Emmeline repeated after the clergyman when it came her turn to do so. She smiled at Nash as the ceremony drew to a close.

The clergyman raised his hands and declared them husband and wife, before he gave Nash permission to kiss her. She felt exposed and giddy all at once. She met him halfway and they kissed for the briefest moment before they pulled apart again.

It had been too short a time for Emmeline's liking, but the next moment there were shouts of exultation from both sides of the aisle as those in attendance rejoiced. Emmeline had not expected the outbursts and laughed at it. "Congratulations, Lady Torrington," Nash said with a nod of his head.

“And to you, Lord Torrington,” Emmeline replied as she looped her arm through his. As they made their way down the aisle, they thanked those who had come. She saw out of the corner of her eye Lord Hawley and with him were Dowager Randall and her niece. A bright smile spread over her face as she gave the group a wave.

Nash grinned. “Looks as though he took your advice.”

Emmeline nodded. Perhaps the man was not a hopeless case in the end. She left the church with a light heart. She sank into the carriage seat beside Lord Torrington with a sigh of relief. “We made it.”

“Yes, now we just have to reorganise households and figure all that mess out,” Nash said as he leaned back.

He seemed every bit as worn out as she was. “I did not sleep at all last night,” she confided.

“Then we are two of a pair,” he replied. He took her hand into his and brought it up to his lips. “Worth it though.”

Emmeline smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder. She gave his cheek a little kiss and felt the stubble there. “Are you growing your facial hair out?”

“It has crossed my mind,” Nash said with a chuckle. “Are you filing a protest?”

Emmeline shook her head. “I like a beard on a man.”

“I shall aim to not disappoint,” Nash bantered back to her as he turned his head and placed a kiss on her forehead.

Emmeline felt the stirring of longing to be close to him. She hoped the feeling lasted forever. A love like her father and mother’s was all she had ever wanted.

The ride in the carriage was a slow meandering one. It took them so long that he thought perhaps that Emmeline had fallen asleep. As the carriage halted, she was swiftly up and looking around. “So, you had not dropped off into your dreams, then?”

“It was hard not to, but I was too nervous. We did not talk much of after the wedding and it has been weighing on my mind.” Emmeline looked out of the window with apprehension.

Nash frowned and said, “It is just my home, our home.”

“Our home,” Emmeline whispered.

As the door opened, Nash made his way out of the carriage first, and then turned to help Emmeline down. She gave him a look of amusement as he scooped her up instead of letting her down to the ground. “I need to carry you across the threshold.”

“Ah, I see,” Emmeline said. “If you drop me down the steps, then I shall be most upset with you, Your Grace.”

Nash raised an eyebrow at her. “If I drop you, it would be on purpose.”

“You are most cordial.”

“Welcome home, Your Graces!” said the doorman.

“Hello,” Emmeline said, giving him a wave.

The butler met them as they stepped into the entrance hall.

“Lady Torrington and I will be upstairs getting the rooms sorted. If you need me, please find someone else.”

The butler chuckled and nodded his head. “I understand very well, Your Grace.”

The stairs were quite tall and Emmeline complained, “You are not going to carry me up those, Nash.”

“I beg to differ.”

She hid her face in his shoulder. “I am going to die.”

“You have such little faith in your husband.” He was too amused at her fretting to be offended.

When they reached the top of the stairs, he allowed her to slide down to the floor. Only once her feet hit the floor, she showed no inclination to move aside. Instead, she stood right in his way and stared at him intently.

“What is it?” Nash asked in a soft rush of breath. Her nearness brought a hush down on him, making it sacred and secret despite the open hallway where they stood.

Emmeline leaned forward bringing her lips against his in a sweet, unsure gesture. Nash drew in a deep breath and with it the scent of her. “We should go,” Nash whispered.

She blinked at him. Her fingers curled around his hand. He led her down the hallway, their banter silenced for the moment.

“Home sweet home,” Nash said in conspiracy as he approached his set of rooms. He turned the knob and pushed the door open. Emmeline peered through the door, but neither of them took a step to go in. Nash chuckled and sighed. “Come on,” he urged as he pulled her into the room by her wrists.

There was a moment when he almost thought they were going to have a game of tug-of-war, but instead she just fell into him. He kicked the door closed and stood listening for a moment. She gave him a curious look.

“Was listening for Charles,” Nash explained. “He always seems to be lurking about.”

Emmeline nodded. “He is a ghostly thing that Charles. I never get to meet him.”

“That is because he mostly stays at my home and at the offices. You will see so much of him soon that you will wish he were elsewhere. Are you nervous?”

Emmeline shrugged. “A little.”

“Do you want to simply take a nap?”

Emmeline laughed. “Ah, your devious plans are unravelled, Lord Torrington. You are tired!”

“You caught me out,” he said with feigned disgrace. “Or am I really just pretending to be tired so that I can catch you unaware?”

Emmeline gave a little yelp in play as Nash pulled her to him. “I surrender.” She gave him a sweet kiss on the lips. “Actually, I think it is I that have trapped you.”

“I never doubt for a moment that you were the mastermind behind all of this.” Nash gave her a roguish wink before he fell over onto the bed, taking her with him in a cascade of satin and laughter.

Epilogue

(Two months after the wedding)

“We are going to be late,” Emmeline said as she peered out of the carriage window.

Nash was reclining in the seat next to her with his boots propped up on the seat in front of them. He looked to be asleep. “I am going to get out of this carriage and drag that cart out of the road myself,” Emmeline threatened.

“That should be quite the sight,” Nash said without opening his eyes.

Emmeline hit him on the leg. “Well?”

“Well, what? These things happen.” Nash sat up and stretched. “Do you want me to go thrash about like some deranged bear?”

Emmeline laughed. “No, of course not. But you could show some interest.”

Nash sighed, but eventually exited the carriage to try and light a fire under the men who were removing the broken down cart that was blocking the street. Much to Emmeline’s amusement she watched as her husband, in his newly tailored suit, set about helping to pull the cart out of the road. With a nobleman deeming to get out of his carriage, it seemed others were more willing to help the labourer move his cart.

By the time, Nash came back to the carriage, his coat was off and Emmeline could tell that most of his good humour was gone. She offered him a sweet smile as he climbed into the carriage. Once he had collapsed onto the seat next to her, she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“That was as heroic as any rescue in a fairytale,” Emmeline whispered to the grumpy duke.

He tried to eye her with irritation, but Emmeline saw the man had already lost most of his steam to her sweet administrations. “I shall sleep from here to the Granton estate,” he proclaimed loudly before he

pointedly closing his eyes.

Emmeline giggled softly. She whispered, "I shall protect your sanctuary with my very life."

"Shush," Nash grumbled as he pulled her on top of him.

Emmeline shook her head at him, her hair already coming out of the pins that Jasmine had worked so hard putting in. "You shall have me looking as if you had ravaged me in the carriage."

"I think the driver is used to that," Nash said in amusement as he opened his eyes to look up at her.

Emmeline glared at him and took a playful swat at his head, which he fended off easily enough. "What about a house full of partygoers? Do you wish them to think you a rogue?"

"A rogue? A rogue does not ravish his own wife, a rogue ravishes some other man's wife." Nash rolled his eyes at her preposterous claim.

Emmeline primly moved back to her seat and straightened herself as best as she could. "I should have insisted Jasmine ride along with us. At least then I could be certain my hair stayed in its proper place."

"And your corset too," Nash offered helpfully.

She knew he was in a mood and when Nash was in a mood nothing dissuaded him. Emmeline thought back to him in other situations, less scrupulous ones, and she smiled.

"Keep smiling at me like that, and we might miss the party altogether, wife of mine," Nash said as he closed his eyes yet again.

Emmeline toyed with the idea of testing his resolve to that statement, but she was quite excited to go to the party. They had received a special invitation from Lord Hawley and his parents, so that could really mean only one thing, even if the invitation did not state it specifically.

She chose the safe option and let Nash doze. Only when they were driving into the Granton estate did she nudge him awake. "We are at the party."

Nash sat up and stretched. He pulled on his coat as the footman opened the carriage door. Emmeline was so excited she did not wait for Nash to exit first. He did not seem offended by it. "In a hurry?" he asked with a grin.

"It has to be an engagement party," Emmeline said with excitement.

Nash shrugged. "Perhaps. But does not the lady's family normally do the initial announcement?"

"Oh, you know that it can be either really. Besides, Lady Anderson's family might have opted to have it here because there is more space. Lord Hawley and Lady Anderson are sensible people. I think they would have opted for a joint announcement."

Nash put his arm around her waist. "I suppose you will have to go in to find out, or we could just stay out here and guess some more."

"Remind me why I married you, Lord Torrington," Emmeline said as she let him guide her toward the entrance.

Nash whispered, "Because I am a very good dancer."

Inside the party was well under way. Emmeline was sure by the celebratory mood that they had missed any announcement. She eagerly urged Nash to push through the throngs to get her to Lord Hawley, who she could see through the next doorway.

When they broke free of the crowd, Emmeline waved at Lord Hawley and Lady Anderson, who both saw her at the same time. "We are late! I am so sorry, but we got stuck in traffic."

"I told you they were not here yet," Lady Anderson said as she gave Lord Hawley a pat on the upper arm. "He thought you were hiding somewhere."

"Nash does not hide that well," Emmeline pointed out to them.

Lord Hawley agreed with a hearty guffaw. "That he does not. But since you missed the whole thing I shall have to tell you personally that Lady Anderson and I are officially engaged."

"Congratulations!" Emmeline hugged them both, with Nash reaching

around her to give Lord Hawley a handshake as Emmeline tugged Lady Anderson aside. “I am so happy for you, Darla.”

Darla smiled as if she could not believe it was all really happening. “I keep thinking it is a dream. I think I might never touch the ground again.”

Emmeline nodded her understanding as she looked over at her husband. “I know that feeling.”

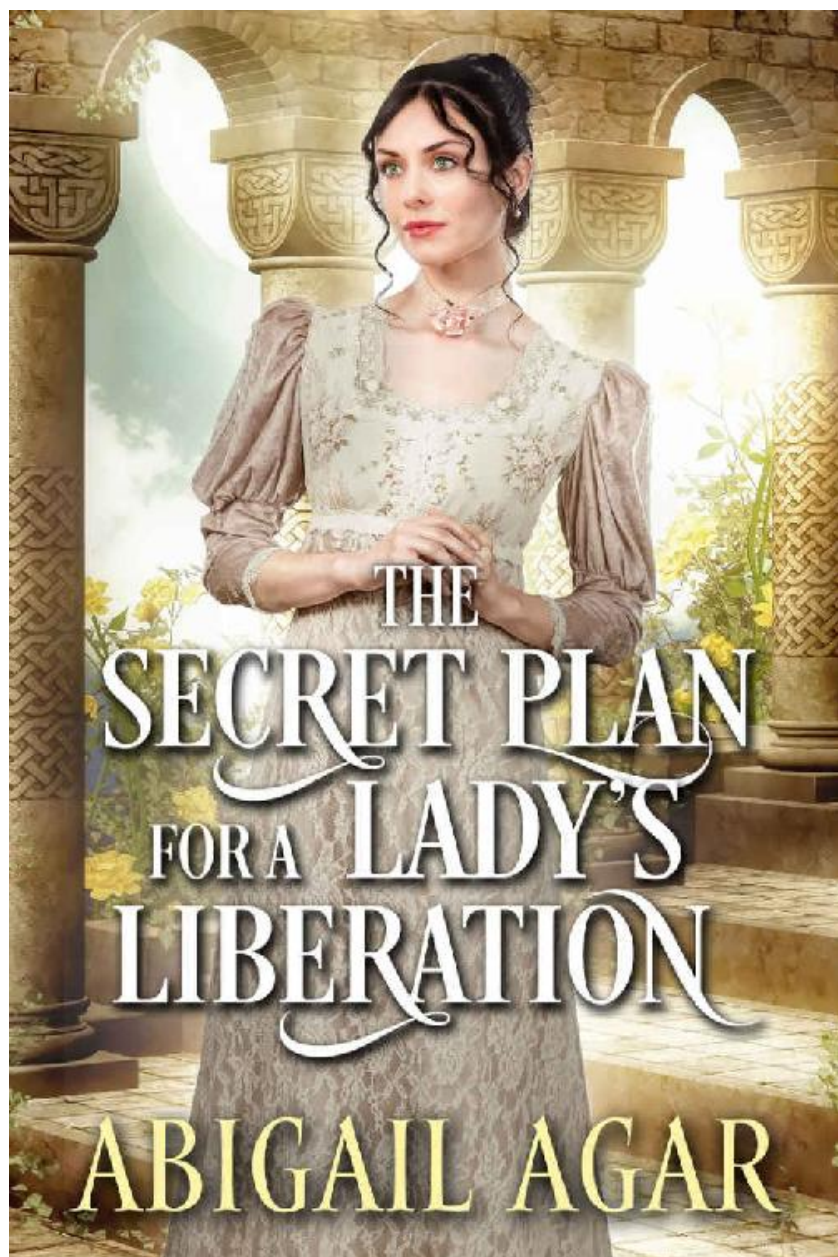
THE END

*Can't get enough of Emmeline and Nash? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*How will Emmeline deal with the nostalgic feeling she has for her home,
now that she lives away from Scotland?
How is our lovely couple going to complete their happiness, even two years
after their wedding?
What is about to happen when Nash's mother starts spending a lot of time
with Emmeline?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser
<http://abigailagar.com/emmeline>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**The Secret Plan for a Lady's Liberation**”, my Amazon
Best-Selling novel!)*



THE
SECRET PLAN
FOR A LADY'S
LIBERATION

ABIGAIL AGAR

The Secret Plan for a Lady's Liberation

Introduction

Lady Charlotte Grand is a wildly intelligent young girl, on the brink of crafting a beautiful life. But there's just one problem: her parents have agreed to marry her off to a two-faced, arrogant Lord. Since everyone but her seems to be blind to his deceit, she decides to concoct a plan to prove his evil ways. But little did she know, when she traveled to London with her family, that she was about to meet an exciting man, capable of stealing her heart. Will she manage to focus on her mission or will she surrender to her feelings?

Handsome Lord Ewan Conrad is a man of incredible title and status. Despite his wealth, he's building an importing and exporting business that sends him traveling around different cities and countries. He's in it for the adventure, even though gossip swirls around him. But when he returns home in London, he's struck with the beauty and charm of a young Lady. Will he dare to aim at her heart or will the secrets she seems to carry get him away from her?

Soon enough, the heroes are about to find themselves in a whirlwind of gossip, anger and betrayal. Will Charlotte find a way to escape from the terror of the deceitful Lord? And will Ewan and Charlotte find in one another a true soul mate, despite all odds?

Chapter 1

“An arranged marriage. Why, it’s simply unbelievable. It’s as though my parents haven’t given a single thought to my happiness. It’s as if they haven’t spoken a single word to me a day in my life!” Charlotte Grant sighed, smashing her fists atop her house dress. Her lower lip buzzed slightly as she frowned at her childhood best friend, the rosy-cheeked Margaret, who was perched on the edge of Charlotte’s bed. It was Margaret’s position to listen to Charlotte’s woes. It was her lifelong duty, at least until both girls were married off to higher-titled men: boosting them beyond their lower-level nobility.

If that was truly what they were both “meant” for. Just another woman, with another title. Sometimes, it sickened Charlotte to her core: knowing that her life was little more than a filler for her parents’ status.

“Lord Seymour isn’t what I would term the greatest match for you, ’tis true,” Margaret said. It was clear she was trying to form the right words so as not to rile Charlotte up even more. “But—”

“There’s simply no buts, Margaret,” Charlotte stammered, strutting across the room. She nabbed a brush from her chest of drawers and began to sweep it through her often wild, near-black locks, which curled outrageously as summer crept closer. “It’s not how I envisioned my life. It’s not as though I was an enormous imbecile when it came to this courting business. I could have found a match myself. And perhaps that match could have pleased my parents.”

“Charlotte, your parents ... They care about you. They truly do,” Margaret began. “And that’s why they’ve chosen Lord Seymour. They know, deep down, that ...”

“Nonsense,” Charlotte scoffed. “My entire life, my father has looked past me, wishing and aching for the son he never had. And now, they want only to adopt Lord Felton Seymour—what a wretched name, no?—and ensure that their family name continues. And what with Felton’s incredible wealth from his grandfather, what could be a more perfect piece of the puzzle?”

Margaret seemed not to know what to say. Since the girls were young things, scampering across the fields of Northern England with wild

eyes and scabbed knees (entirely unladylike, assuredly), they'd long played different roles. Charlotte was the loud one, the popular one: the one apt to lash out with whatever her opinion was, uninhibited. Margaret was far more sensible, and, Charlotte knew, was more the sort to marry whomever her parents pleased. She longed for the comfort of building her own family, of making her own home.

Sometimes, Charlotte sensed that her life would be far easier if she simply administered Margaret's way of being. But she felt a burning in her stomach, one that told her that was simply no option for her.

It was her position to be unruly. She saw no other possibility.

"Absolutely ridiculous," Charlotte stammered again.

Addie, the maid, rapped at the side of the half-cracked door and stuck her crooked nose through. She gave Charlotte a grin and her eyes sparkled as if she already knew what Charlotte was up to. Addie had been around since Charlotte was a teensy thing and had been privy to some of Charlotte's most mischievous acts.

"What are you two up to? Nothing good, I can only assume," Addie said.

"Addie, I simply cannot marry him," Charlotte said, crossing her arms hard across her chest. "It's outside the bounds of reason. The man is an imbecile."

Charlotte was half-conscious of Addie and Margaret making eye contact, seemingly exchanging some sort of agreement. Probably something along the lines of, *Here she goes again.*

"I know, darling. But I've come to fetch you. You know Lord Seymour will arrive for lunch in only an hour's time, and you haven't yet begun to prepare." Addie scanned Charlotte's housedress, the brush in her hair. "Please. You know your mother will have my head if you don't make it in time."

Margaret snapped up from the bed, ready to bolt into action. Charlotte sighed, allowing her shoulders to droop. As usual, she felt pressed toward a hard, impenetrable future she didn't want. One that involved Lord Felton Seymour, her mother and father's overwhelming joy, and her, stuck in some sitting room somewhere with a pile of stitching to do.

For Charlotte—who longed for inventive conversation, for creativity, for hours atop her horse, Goldie (her best friend, besides Margaret)—this was a death sentence.

But Charlotte managed. She slipped into the appropriate light-pink gown, with its low-cut neckline. Her tiny breasts bulged up only slightly beneath the line, and her waist was cinched tight. The pink skirt swirled around her ankles, and her black curls hung with more arrangement than they ordinarily did (especially as she spent so much time riding horses, letting her hair whoosh back in the breeze).

Margaret bid Charlotte goodbye fifteen minutes prior to the arranged lunch, giving her a hard-eyed look. She gripped Charlotte's shoulders, whispering, "You know that whatever happens, I'm here for you. Just because you're married to some arrogant nobleman ..."

Charlotte rolled her eyes back. "Darling Margaret, I know you're always here for me. And I, you. But if you're ever engaged to someone as wretched as Felton, my goodness, I will do anything in my power to end it. For I believe that we, as women, deserve so much more."

Charlotte stepped into the foyer to find her mother touching her face, frowning into the mirror. Her mother, Lady Theodosia Grant, was a good six inches shorter than her daughter, with a bird-like, sharp nose. Her eyes were piercing and bright green, just like Charlotte's. At one time, Theodosia had been a remarkable beauty, capturing the attention of a traveling portraitist who'd come through Northern England only to paint her. The painting now hung in the sitting room of a much, much richer woman, who resided in London. Theodosia didn't speak about it much anymore.

Theodosia swung around the moment she realised her daughter was in the room with her. She flashed a false smile. "Darling," she said. "You look absolutely stunning. I'm rather certain Lord Seymour will be pleased."

"He'd better be," Charlotte said, her nostrils flared. "For he's engaged to me without trying at all. Imagine it. I've worked the entirety of my life to be well-read, well-spoken. I've learned four different languages, am the county's best rider ..."

"Enough," Theodosia said, pursing her lips. "I understand that you think you're too good to marry for the benefit of this family. But you're simply incorrect, Charlotte."

That moment, Lord Ernest Grant entered the foyer. He was tall, broad-chested, with cheeks that sagged down toward his neck. His sideburns were thick and dark grey, and his eyes were far away as if he was continually thinking of anything else. Immediately, Theodosia perked up, arching her brows toward her husband. Despite their seeming inability to understand their daughter, Charlotte was relatively aware that they both still held the other in incredible regard. Perhaps it wasn't love; perhaps nobody truly remained in love. But if it wasn't love, it was rather like it.

"What's this all about?" Ernest asked, his voice jocular. "I imagine the only bickering you girls are doing is playful in nature. Charlotte?" He turned his eyes toward his one and only daughter, standing to the side of his wife. They looked like judges, preparing to tell Charlotte her official punishment—how she would spend the rest of the years of her life.

"Yes," Charlotte murmured. "Playful."

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door. Theodosia turned quickly and snapped her feet across the foyer marble. Charlotte remained back, conscious that her father continued to study her. He seemed to look at her like a strange specimen, something he could never possibly understand.

"Lord Felton Seymour. What a pleasure it is to see you!" Theodosia said, her voice bright and sunny and false.

Charlotte's heart dripped somewhere into her stomach. She swallowed hard. Everything within her told her to spin back, to rush out the back door of their crumbling family estate and leap atop Goldie. She imagined herself tearing across the moors, tears streaking down her face. "I can't possibly live this way," she would murmur to herself. "I'll find another place to roam. Change my name. Charlotte Grant will be nevermore."

Lord Felton Seymour greeted her mother and then stepped into the foyer, bowing to both her father and to Charlotte. His eyes were strangely small and watery, and his chin was weak and teensy and shiny. It looked rather like the chin of a much younger boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen. For whatever reason, Charlotte fixated on this chin, feeling a frown form.

“Charlotte, you’re looking lovely this afternoon,” he said. His voice was pompous and bouncy. The very nature of it turned Charlotte’s stomach over.

Theodosia glared at Charlotte from behind Felton’s shoulder. Charlotte forced a smile, a response. “As are you, Lord Seymour.” But in her own ears, her voice was remarkably sterile. It didn’t even sound like hers.

Moments later, Addie announced lunch. The four of them marched into the dining room, where the table had been set with a white tablecloth, flickering candles, and light pink flowers plucked from the newly-growing garden. Charlotte sat across from Felton, trying her hardest not to glare at him. Instead, her eyes floated across the room, atop her parents’ heads, towards the window. The April sun steamed in between the lace drapes.

“It looks marvellous, Lady Grant,” Felton said, sweeping his napkin across his lap and reaching for his fork. “I’ve told my mother time and again, if we don’t find a better cook like yours, I’m leaving the family estate.”

Theodosia chuckled. She brought a teensy morsel of chicken from her platter to her lips and chewed slowly, letting her green eyes turn towards Charlotte. After swallowing her baby morsel, she said, “Charlotte was quite good at cooking when she was a bit younger. It was one of her moods, you know. Until next, it was the pianoforte. And next, it was painting ...” Theodosia gave Charlotte a half-smile.

“Oh, are you quite interested in music? I say, I’m terribly good at the pianoforte, myself,” Felton said, his voice bouncing along, even in the midst of his chewing. “It’s terribly difficult for me to find another person with quite my skills. You can imagine how I’ve always wanted to find a partner to play a duet with.”

“Why! That’s marvellous news. Something in common,” Ernest said. “You must play for us, both of you. I imagine that will make for a wonderful afternoon treat.”

“Splendid!” Felton said, his smile stretching wide enough for Charlotte to see the gravy frothing around behind his teeth.

Charlotte couldn’t have verbalised a worse way to spend her time. She hardly nibbled at her lunch, feeling too tight and stitched up. She felt

the colour draining from her face and thought very seriously about feigning an illness. But as her betrothed, her mother, and her father scraped their platters clean, she realised it was time for this charade to begin.

“Shall we journey into the sitting room, then?” Theodosia said. “I, for one, believe it’s time for the two of you to begin your duet for us.”

“I’m afraid I ...” Charlotte began before watching her father slice a particularly dark look towards her. She cleared her throat, and then nodded. She knew better than to act like her wild self in front of Felton. She fought at every single urge.

Once in the sitting room, her parents tossed themselves back in their chairs, seemingly exhausted post-lunch. Charlotte perched atop the piano bench, feeling Felton move alongside her. His elbow bumped into her upper arm. She cleared her throat, feeling her eyes well up with tears. How ridiculous this all was! She was eighteen years old, on the brink of the rest of her life. And yet, she would be forced to do this life, this wretched literal duet, for what felt like forever.

“Shall we begin in the key of A?” Felton offered, glancing her way.

“Whatever pleases you,” Charlotte said.

“Very well.”

Felton struck forward, drawing his fingers atop the higher octaves in a sort of Minuet. Charlotte bided her time before bringing her fingers to the lower notes and playing along with minor chords, ensuring that everything stayed in-tune but not bothering to add any flourishes. It seemed that Felton had enough flourishes for the both of them. In fact, as they played along, he bobbed his entire body back and forth—knocking his left shoulder into her and making her shiver.

Charlotte flashed her eyes towards her mother, giving her a sombre glare. Her mother arched her brow, giving what could only be a look of warning. If Charlotte didn’t behave herself, Theodosia would see to a punishment. “All women must think of their family first and foremost,” Theodosia had told her, time and time again. “Your father. Our name. It’s the essential thing. It will continue long after we’re buried, Charlotte. You must stop thinking that all you are, all you can be, is the only thing. Your painting. Your music. Your horse riding. It is nothing when compared to the importance of name.”

Lost in thought, Charlotte flubbed a chord in her left hand. Immediately, the sound became clunky and foreign. Felton drew his hands from the keys, flashing his fingers skyward.

“Dear me!” he cried, his eyes widening towards Charlotte. “I can’t imagine why you thought that would be a relevant chord at this time, dear Charlotte.”

Charlotte shot up from the piano bench, her cheeks growing rosy. Her mother’s face darkened still more. Felton remained on the bench, seemingly incredulous. Charlotte tittered, sensing that everyone in the room thought her a fool.

“I do apologise, Lord Seymour. It seems that I haven’t practiced nearly enough in the previous months. It had been a habit of mine to practice frequently, to fill my days with music. But as of late, I’ve spent the majority of my free hours atop my horse, Goldie.”

Felton drew his arms across his chest. He looked like a sour child at a birthday party, one who’d lost a game. Charlotte imagined him now as a much older man: fifty-something, his jowls hanging on either side of his teensy chin. She imagined reaching across the table and dotting a napkin across a flick of forgotten food. She shuddered.

“I really am not feeling terribly well, Mother. Father,” Charlotte continued. Her stomach clenched as her fingers fluttered over it. Although she’d eaten very little, she and Addie had strung her dress far too tight, and the world felt as though it was enclosing itself over her. She forced herself to take a deep breath insisting internally that she could never be one of those women who “fainted” or “grew woozy.” How childlike. How silly.

Felton stood and marched beside her, furrowing his brow. “You are looking a bit peaked, Charlotte,” he offered. “Wouldn’t you like to sit? I don’t mind playing the pianoforte myself, you know. It’s swell to have a duet every once in a while, but you must listen to me play alone. I really am quite marvellous.”

Charlotte gave him a lacklustre grin before perching on the edge of the chair next to her mother. Her eyes grew glazed as Felton returned to the pianoforte, whipping his coattails out behind him and flipping his fingers across the keys. Charlotte’s eyes flickered towards her father, who seemed to be struggling to keep his eyes open. She

snickered softly.

Nearly an hour later—or perhaps a small infinity—Charlotte, her mother, and her father walked Lord Felton Seymour to the door of their crumbling mansion. As Felton dropped his hat upon his golden curls, his eyes scanned the surrounding moors, the rusted-out door hinges, the busted bricks along the south end of the mansion. Charlotte's brain spat with anger at his rueful gaze.

"It really does have rustic charm, doesn't it?" Felton said, his voice slimy and ill-mannered. "Goodness me, if every mansion kept itself up, how boring the world would be. Eh?"

Theodosia's laugh was violent and false. Ernest lent Felton a large smile. Charlotte felt apt to smack Felton across the cheeks, but she knew that in her parents' eyes, he was their ticket to passing along the family name. And his grandfather's money: it would certainly play a part in the upkeep of their crumbling mansion. This sniveling 20-year-old man, who'd forced them through a dire afternoon of his (albeit very good) pianoforte playing—they were at his mercy.

The moment the door clicked closed behind him Charlotte whirled towards her parents, drawing her arms tight across her chest. She felt her cheeks grow bright red with anger. Her parents stood as a united force, seemingly bracing themselves for the brunt of her attack. Certainly, no son they could have had would have the sort of volatility of Charlotte. Certainly, she had more power in her pinky than any potential son.

"What would you like to say for yourselves?" Charlotte began, her voice low.

"Charlotte. It's forbidden that you take such a tone of voice in this house," Theodosia said.

"Forbidden? You're saying it's forbidden for me to ask a question? It's apparent to me, Mother and Father that you think very little of that man—nay—boy who was just in our midst. How can you possibly send me off with him, for the rest of my life? How can you possibly not see the error in this decision?"

Ernest took a mighty step towards his study. His eyes burned towards Theodosia. "I'll let you girls work this out yourselves," he said.

“Wonderful, Father,” Charlotte scoffed. “It’s absolutely appropriate for you to be here for me, for you to fight for my rights and my happiness. But instead, you’ll spend your afternoon reading old historic texts about other people who are already dead, just like always. Marvellous, Father. Thank you ever so much for your assistance.”

Theodosia shot forward. She drew her fingers around Charlotte’s chin and gripped it tightly, almost shaking her head for her. Charlotte let out a tiny peep.

“Charlotte,” Theodosia said, her voice a rasp. “You are a girl with a powerful tongue. And yet it seems I haven’t taught you to use it correctly.”

Ernest was out of earshot now. “I cannot marry him, Mother. Not for our family name. Not for any reason. He’s pompous and self-assured and ... and there’s not a bone in my body that could ever love him.”

“Love?” Theodosia scoffed. “Darling girl, you have your head in the clouds.”

“Mother, that’s simply not true,” Charlotte said. She yanked herself back, drawing her fingers across her chin. She still felt the weight of her mother’s fingers, the light touch of her nails into her skin. “You know that, left to my own devices, I could manage this estate myself. We don’t need to pass along the family name to someone like Felton Seymour.”

Theodosia rolled her eyes back before crumbling into another false fit of laughter. She shuddered and said, “You have a complete inability to manage your emotions, let alone this entire estate. You think that, after your display with Lord Seymour today, your father will give any thought to putting the estate in your name? You must be more delusional than I first assumed, my girl.

“No. You know very well that the title must go to your suitor. Otherwise, we may lose the title to a terrible distant cousin. Do you wish that for our name, Charlotte Grant? Do you wish that our title is lost, and we remain in this crumbling estate until the day we die?”

The room was taut with tension, making it difficult for Charlotte to breathe. Her lips parted as she hunted for the proper response. But suddenly, quick as a rabbit, she sprung towards the door, flung it

open, and rushed out. Her dress whirled behind her, drawing itself across the mud and grass. Addie would be devastated, would have to spend hours wringing out the bottom to clean it. But Charlotte felt like a caged bird, finally freed. She inhaled the bright April air, which was thick with smells of flowers and growing grass and manure.

Immediately, it calmed her. And slowly, the wretched face of Lord Felton Seymour flickered out like a fire going out at the end of the night. With a final jolt of strength, Charlotte pushed herself along the moor, heading towards her favourite place in the world: her horse stables.

Atop Goldie, nothing in the world could devastate her. She was the epitome of free.

Chapter 2

Zachary the 20-something stable boy was hunkered in the corner of the little shack-like stables, drawing a shoddy broom across the floor and collecting bits of hay into a pile. His cat-like eyes drew towards Charlotte as she stormed in, huffing. Behind his patchy beard, he gave her a mischievous smile. In a cockney accent, one formed from a life on the streets in London prior to his stable boy gig up north, he asked:

“What’s a lass like you doin’ up in these stables, here, hey? On a day like today? Other stable hand tells me you been havin’ a rather spiffy dinner up yonder.”

Charlotte broke into her first real smile in hours. “It’s good to see you, Zachary. I have to say, you must be one of the only people I can trust in this world. And it’s a good thing, too, what with you spending so much time with my baby.”

The majestic Goldie ripped her head back, tossing her brown mane. Her eyes were sombre, yet fully trusting.

“How’s she been today?” Charlotte asked, tapping forward and drawing her fingers along the horse’s thin, bony cheeks. She dotted the top of the horse’s fuzzy nose with her lips.

“Oh, just as right as rain, this girl always is,” Zachary said. “Course, always hankering for a ride. Didn’t know if you’d be down here, what with your affairs up at the main house.”

Charlotte sighed, rolling her eyes. “I truly wish I could say that those affairs were worthwhile, Zachary. But to put it simply, I only wish to be right here, in the midst of the manure and the grass and the dirt.”

“Seems to me you’ve got a bit of a problem with the bottom of your dress, Lady Charlotte ...” Zachary said. His eyes skated along the edge of the bright material. “Can’t imagine that’s proper riding wear.”

“It’ll have to do,” Charlotte stammered. She reached for the top of the wooden barrier between her and Goldie. Just behind was Goldie’s equipment: her harness, her saddle. Occasionally, Charlotte liked to ride barebacked but didn’t trust herself not to fall to her death while wearing such a slippery gown.

“It’s just absolutely ridiculous to me, Zachary,” Charlotte began as she suited up the horse. “Ridiculous that a lady should be filled with such knowledge, such artistry, such passion in this life. And then be faced with a future of childbearing, of listening to her husband chew and chew and chew across the dinner table. And then, round out the day with hours of him marvelling at how wonderful he is at the pianoforte.”

“I take it we’re here talkin’ about a specific person, nay?” Zachary offered, laughing.

“I can’t say for certain, Zachary. But I should say that you’re much more of a catch than some horrendous men with titles and fortunes!” Charlotte sighed.

Zachary scrubbed the back of his neck with blackened fingernails. “You’re gonna make me blush, here, Lady Charlotte,” he teased.

Charlotte led Goldie out the opposite double-wide wooden doors. The wind off the moors whipped through her black curls, now completely unruly, even after she and Addie had laboured so intensely to make them lunch-appropriate. Charlotte drew her left leg into the stirrup and then erupted over the top of Goldie, positioning herself with one leg on either side. She leaned close to the horse’s ears, whispering, “If we run like the wind, my girl, they’ll never catch us. They never will.”

Charlotte shifted her weight, giving Goldie the sign that it was time to go. Goldie shot forward, past the fences and through the wide-open moor. Charlotte’s body rollicked back and forth, but she held tight to the reins, ensuring she didn’t fall to either side of the horse. She’d long heard of devastating stories of horse deaths—of girls spinning off from their beloved horses and cracking their skulls open atop rocks. This couldn’t possibly happen to her. Charlotte felt she had far too much to “do” in this life to allow herself that kind of loss, the loss of everything, before her nineteenth birthday.

The horse shot towards a creek, one that whirled its way from the northern estate, all the way to the tiny town towards the valley. Charlotte brought Goldie to a slight canter. They walked along the edge of the creek while Charlotte’s mind continued to purr with a thousand thoughts a second.

“How do I calm myself down, my girl?” she whispered to Goldie,

wishing she could find some sort of answer for her racing thoughts.

The root of the problem wasn't Lord Felton Seymour. Charlotte knew that. Rather, the root was that her parents simply didn't trust her abilities, her intelligence, and her manner. Although she'd excelled at nearly everything throughout her life, she'd never been her parents' *raison d'être*. Rather, they'd tried and ached and wept for a son—but her mother's womb had remained barren after Charlotte. And thusly, she was a second-prize token, the only tool they had to adopt. And they'd chosen Lord Felton Seymour for that adoption.

As it was now mere days away from April, the Season was brimming and ready to begin in London. Charlotte could feel the expectation of it. She and Margaret had discussed it at-length as children—marvelling at the dresses they would wear, the men they would meet. As Margaret's parents had fallen into a sort of ruin, they'd had to sell their London mansion in recent years and had decided, instead, to match Margaret with a suitor in the north.

But although Charlotte had been matched with Lord Felton Seymour, the match hadn't yet been properly announced. In that case, it was more or less a secret—and not yet “official.” The thought dropped into Charlotte's mind with immediacy. It felt strangely forceful, this thought. She immediately shot her heels into either side of the horse and felt Goldie stumble slightly, fearful at Charlotte's reaction.

“I'm sorry, my girl,” Charlotte offered. “Really. I wasn't thinking.”

The horse continued across the moor. Charlotte kicked up speed, whipping wildly towards the edge of the forest. It was nearing early evening, and the sun had begun to drip towards the tip-tops of the trees. The air had become crisp and chilly and delicious. How precious early spring was! How very soon it gave over to the ferocity of summer.

What had Felton said regarding the Season? Charlotte pondered for a moment, trying to dive through some of the arrogant words he'd spoken for some sort of truth. Finally, she remembered their most previous luncheon when he'd stated that he was grateful not to have to dive through the “charade” of the Season, due to their engagement. “However, I will certainly attend a ball or two, if only Charlotte will dance with me,” he'd said.

Of course, Lord Felton Seymour had his own home in London, a place

he frequently journeyed to in the height of Parliament. The home was rather close to Charlotte's family's home in London, certainly less than a mile. With that distance, Charlotte could keep tabs on the horrendous man.

She could assess his whereabouts, his actions.

She could learn about him, beyond the pompous face he presented to her parents. She could learn his weaknesses. And perhaps—if she was clever enough and crafty enough—she could arrange for some sort of “big reveal.” She could catch him being ungentlemanly. And whatever it was he would do, whatever it was she would reveal, it would surely cause her parents to end the engagement. For they wouldn't wish their name to be matched with someone of such ungentlemanly nature.

Felton was a complete and total imbecile. Charlotte felt certain, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that she could operate this plan. She could be a sort of puppet master, manipulating the people in her life to ensure that her future wasn't this wretched, unmanageable thing.

Perhaps she could find a better suitor, as well ...

Of course, that wasn't the purpose for any of this. Rather, she felt certain that she couldn't fall for anyone; that she was strong-willed and purposeful, that she could manage her family's estate on her own. Her parents had longed for a son since she'd opened her feminine eyes. Yet she was going to prove to them that they'd never needed that son.

That she was strong enough for all of them.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, Charlotte raced Goldie back to the stables. As she tore from the saddle, she gave Zachary a wild, rosy-cheeked smile. He grinned at her, seemingly drinking in her insanity, her charm.

“Zachary, I must look a fright!” Charlotte said, tittering as she drew the saddle from Goldie's back. “I simply can't control myself right now. I do apologise.”

“Ne'er a lass as pretty as you, Lady Charlotte,” he said. “I always see the wheels turning back there between your ears.”

Charlotte helped brush Goldie clean, cooing to the gorgeous creature

to calm her after their afternoon across the moors. Then, she bid Zachary adieu, lifted her chin, and sprung back down the path towards the estate with a renewed sense of purpose. When she reached the door, her fingers were nearly wrapped around the handle when it suddenly whipped back, revealing the desolate figures of her mother and father. Ernest and Theodosia scowled at her, pinching their lips together tight.

“Young lady,” Theodosia began, sweeping her hand to Charlotte’s wrist and guiding her into the foyer. “I don’t know what the meaning of your actions is, in this household. It’s as if you believe you own and operate all goings-on, without a thought to your father and me.”

Charlotte quivered slightly, sensing that if she didn’t stitch up her act fast, she’d be in over her head. She turned her eyes to the ground, again mapping out her plan. Her mother had allowed the door to remain open, and it wafted to-and-fro in the breeze behind her. Addie hadn’t yet lit the candles in the hall, and the house was shadowy, creepy. Filled with ghosts, Charlotte felt sure.

“I yearn only to apologise, Mother and Father,” Charlotte said, her voice low.

It was clear that this wasn’t what her parents had expected. They exchanged glances. Theodosia’s hand snuck along her bodice, curving along the skin of her bosom. Again, she gaped at Charlotte.

“Pardon me?” she asked, sounding as confused as a child.

“Mother and Father, it’s simply that—given this new arrangement with Lord Felton Seymour ...” Charlotte began.

“Something that your father and I feel incredibly committed to, mind you,” Theodosia warned.

“Certainly. I understand the importance of this engagement,” Charlotte said, her words articulate. She drew her palms together at her chest, flattening them tight against one another as if she was praying, or pleading. “I know that Lord Felton Seymour will be a beneficial part of this family, a man to extend the family line. And, in turn, he will have a title worth naming—our title. And the line will continue.”

Charlotte felt that these words could only be spoken in sarcasm. She

was grateful her parents seemed rapt with the meaning of the words, rather than their tone.

“You agree to marry for our line, my dear?” her father asked. He sent a thick tongue across his bottom lip. “This is marvellous news.”

“But what’s on your mind, darling?” Theodosia asked, tilting her head. She knew Charlotte far too well to think she would agree without stipulation.

“It’s simply that, well ...” Charlotte sighed, drawing her toe along a crack in the marble floor. “It’s simply I’m envious of all the girls preparing for the Season in London, the girls who haven’t yet found their suitor. The parties, the dances. The gowns.” Charlotte forced her eyes to roll back as if she was some sort of silly girl who could daydream endless daydreams about whirling through ballrooms on the arms of London’s gentlemen.

As if that could possibly compare to being wild and free atop her horse, darting across the moors.

Her father’s thick lips had stretched into a smile. It seemed he was lapping up her story, falsely comprehending Charlotte to be one of these frivolous girls. Of course he did! He’d long looked past her, seeing only a pretty young thing “without a brain.” Only sons could have such a thing.

“I see what she’s saying,” Ernest said, drawing his hand across his wife’s shoulder. “She wishes to be a part of the full fun of the Season. To have the coming out party. To meet the other girls. My goodness, Theodosia, what would your life have been without it?”

Theodosia arched her brow, seemingly tossing around the concept. Charlotte gave her a sombre nod, pushing forward Ernest’s ideas regarding her true intentions.

“And why shouldn’t she be a part of it?” Ernest continued, his smile widening. “Imagine it, darling. You’re constantly complaining about the grey springs of the North. How much you love London, Theodosia. How you ache for it. The art and the music and the life.”

“And at the end of the Season?” Theodosia asked, her voice harsh. “At the end, you will accept the engagement to Lord Felton Seymour? It will be announced, as planned?”

“Yes,” Charlotte said, feeling her throat catch with the lie. Rather: it wasn’t yet a lie. If she ultimately failed in her mission, she deserved something as wretched as a marriage to Lord Felton Seymour.

“Marvellous,” Ernest said. He rapped his hands together, searching for the doorway.

Suddenly, Addie appeared—all bright eyes and whirling, greying curls. It seemed she was continually on call for them, the ears at the doorway. As she approached, she made eyes at Charlotte, seemingly demanding what she was up to. But Charlotte gave nothing away.

“What is it?” Addie asked.

“I would like to celebrate,” Ernest said. “As the evening draws to a close, we shall toast to my daughter’s upcoming Season in London. In three days’ time, we will depart for the city and remain at the London home until summertime, at which time we will begin arrangements for Charlotte’s marriage to Lord Felton Seymour.”

Addie bowed her head as she snuck from the foyer. Charlotte followed her mother and father into the sitting room, where she watched a zombie-like Addie pour them each a glass of wine. When Addie slipped the glass into Charlotte’s hand, she stitched her eyebrows together for a quick moment, demanding answers. But Charlotte just lent a soft smile.

“To my daughter, the belle of every Season ball,” Ernest said, shooting his glass forward.

Theodosia did the same. Charlotte followed suit, wishing she felt the exuberance and excitement they did. Rather, her heart beat wildly in her chest, so much so that she struggled to breathe. As she tilted the glass of wine back, pouring the liquid across her tongue, she thought of a million possible futures for herself: none of which involved Lord Felton Seymour.

It was up to her to change her destiny. It was up to her to outsmart the entire London Society, along with the two people closest to her—her parents.

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